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ABSTRACT

David R. Jones shares his knowledge and experience and the research done by his organization, the Community Service Society of New York, in his twice monthly column in the "New York Amsterdam News," New York City's leading African American newsweekly. The column, "The Urban Agenda," explores practical options that can help resolve the pressing social problems of society and cities. A unifying idea is that city problems are national problems that require national attention. Only federal and state governments operating in unison with local authorities, community-based organizations, business leaders, and concerned citizens can produce solutions. The columns reprinted in this collection date from 1992, and are grouped into the following categories: (1) "Solving the Urban Crisis" (4 columns); (2) "Gutted Budgets and Ruined Lives" (6 columns); (3) "Genuine Welfare Reform" (4 columns); (4) "Education That Works" (5 columns); (5) "Health Care for the Poor" (6 columns); (6) "Solving the Housing Crisis" (4 columns); (7) "Improving Race Relations and Empowerment" (3 columns); and (8) "Safeguarding the Future" (4 columns). (SLD)

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A selection of columns
reprinted from the *New York Amsterdam News*

The URBAN AGENDA

by DAVID R. JONES

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150th ANNIVERSARY

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THE URBAN AGENDA

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INTRODUCTION

The problems of America are reflected in its cities. Crime, homelessness, rampant job loss and collapsing educational opportunities plague all American communities. But it is in America's cities that the problems manifest themselves most severely. And it is in those cities that solutions will have to be found.

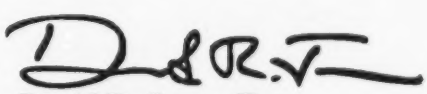
If one idea runs through the essays collected here, it is that city problems are national problems requiring national attention. Only federal and state governments operating in unison with local authorities, community based organizations, business leaders and concerned citizens can solve these problems.

That simple idea may have been muddied by the outcome of the 1994 midterm elections, but it should be no less compelling. If the wave of conservative politicians elected to national office shows anything, it is that Americans want effective government that serves their interests. With growing numbers of urban ills leaping state boundaries, individual states and municipalities will have to look to a slimmer, but smarter Washington for solutions.

In the absence of well crafted programs and articulate spokespersons who can explain the problems and argue for solutions, one pernicious idea is gaining ground – a tendency to blame the poor for their misery. Rather than thinking long and hard about our nation's needs, our mainstream media and opinion leaders have instead reported on the scapegoating, when they have not joined in it themselves.

The real story is how our citizens suffer from problems they could not possibly create for themselves or be held responsible for. From health care and job shortages to a housing and education crisis, the things tearing America apart can only be resisted through bold strategies that government and the private sector aggressively craft together.

The articles that make up this collection first appeared under the heading, "The Urban Agenda," in the *Amsterdam News*, New York City's leading African American newsweekly, from 1992 on. The Community Service Society is releasing the articles in book form to encourage more discussion and thinking about the core problems our nation faces.



David R. Jones, Esq.
December 1994

Part One

SOLVING THE URBAN CRISIS

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, June 27, 1992

Cities in decay

Urban America is dying, and our national leadership couldn't care less.

With the American economy sputtering, the metropolitan region still in the depths of recession and more than one in four New Yorkers living in poverty, no one is offering leadership to stem the long national slide.

The field of candidates is depressing. The one in town last week blamed the crisis of the cities on liberalism and hectored the poor about their lack of "values." He is reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to learn about Black people. Maybe he should wait until the movie comes out.

Another hopeful attacked rapper Sister Souljah and then promised that he would furlough more than 100,000 federal workers – this instead of dealing patiently and thoughtfully with the hard issues of survival facing millions. And a third, who paints himself as a man on a white horse, studiously avoids saying anything of substance.

Twenty-four years after the Kerner Commission confirmed that the nation was dividing into unequal societies, the same social conditions spawning unrest in the mid-60s continue today. National leaders still manipulate issues of race and class to benefit the few, instead of facing the onslaught of drugs, AIDS, job decline and a national recession head on. Only weeks after the Los Angeles riots, the needs of the cities are forgotten already.

Washington march for cities

But some leaders do not forget.

Mayors representing many of our urban areas led an enthusiastic march on Washington to "Save Our Cities" several weeks ago. Despite reports of a small turnout, the march was one of the capital's largest ever, attracting close to 300,000 citizens outraged over the abandonment of urban America.

The marchers supported the Conyers bill (H.R. 3601), which would spur urban economic recovery by helping local governments rebuild their city's infrastructures, rehire laid-off workers and address education, housing and health needs. The demonstration was sponsored by the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Boston's Mayor Ray Flynn and New York's David Dinkins were prime movers of the demonstration, an outgrowth of an earlier "Urban Summit" convened by Dinkins.

Coming just days after Los Angeles exploded, the march's timing was significant. With the plight of South Central Los Angeles symbolizing urban America, and the devolution of our inner cities the lead story for the world's media, the demonstration made a positive statement – that government has concrete tasks to perform.

Now ghost towns

It was disastrous public policies and shortsighted private initiatives that accelerated the destruction of once strong cities. Parts of Detroit became virtual ghost towns with the decline of the automobile industry. Baltimore's vacant shipyards are a haunting reminder of a glorious past when Sparrows Point and ocean transport were synonymous. Gary, Indiana, the site of Richard Hatcher's successful "Black Power" candidacy in 1967, is a shadow of its former self with the collapse of the area's steel industry.

Support for Conyers bill to aid cities

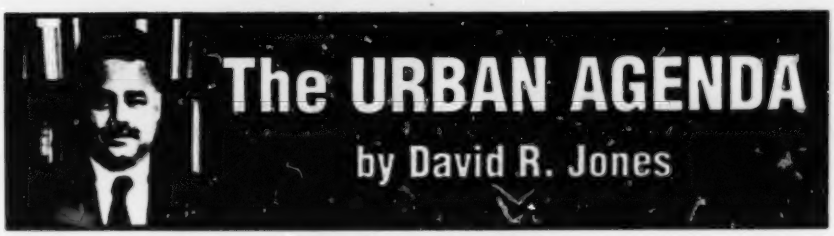
Closer to New York, the majestic Colgate clock stands in a vacant Jersey City lot, recalling the days when manufacturing ruled both shores of the Hudson. Manhattan's rotting West Side piers attest to the city's eclipse as the nation's pre-eminent port.

These urban areas have common problems. The loss of a stable middle class to nearby suburbs deteriorated the urban tax base, while the flight of private industry contributed to the decline of local urban economies. Lost tax revenues hurt the delivery of public services, particularly public education.

Still the color line

As poverty becomes concentrated in inner cities, racism and discrimination drag on. African American and Latino citizens are still branded by color, making common cause even with economically hard-pressed Whites difficult. What W.E.B. DuBois said almost 90 years ago remains true: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line." Ironically, urban America's decline comes when African Americans and Latinos are assuming electoral leadership of our largest cities. In a sick twist, the victims of discrimination are now forced to "manage" the decline of their communities.

My next column will examine how the federal government abandoned our urban areas and what must be done for cities to survive.



Saturday, July 4, 1992

Federal Dollars for Urban America

Our central cities are in crisis, but they do not suffer alone. Their deterioration affects the entire nation. Cities are where the bulk of businesses and universities are centered, where capital is generated and where the future of a multicultural society will be decided. Rebuilding the cities is not charity but national self-interest.

The urban crisis was fueled by a conscious federal policy to abandon the cities. Washington's 12-year denial of financial support helped mire states and localities in debt while legitimate demands for city services grew.

The National League of Cities reported last year on the extent of federal withdrawal. Transfer payments from Washington to the cities, which represented nine percent of local revenue at the end of the '70s, plummeted to 4.2 percent by 1987. Worse, general revenue sharing, the largest source of unrestricted federal urban aid, was eliminated in 1986. Losing these funds forced cities to use their own scarce dollars to pay for valuable programs.

To offset losses, cities increased local taxes. City residents now faced higher personal income and property taxes. States and cities also instituted new fees to generate dollars that could counter growing budget deficits.

The burden of mandates

While national leaders starved the cities, they also imposed new requirements on municipalities to spend their own scarce dollars. These requirements, or "mandates", demand that states and cities provide certain public services or meet particular standards – a reasonable practice if necessary funding is provided. But the federal government often fails to provide that funding. States have also begun to "pass the buck" on to the cities.

Gramm-Rudman, defense build-up, and tax "reform,"

With the passage of the Gramm-Rudman budget-balancing legislation, the massive '80s defense build-up, and the 1986 Tax Reform Act, Congress also played its part in urban decline. Gramm-Rudman effectively put budget-deficit concerns ahead of the need to address critical human needs. And while the budget balancers were gutting domestic spending, the vault was left open for the Pentagon to help itself, with Ronald Reagan building the largest peacetime standing army in U.S. history.

The 1986 tax reform package also cut dollars that would have gone to cities. Disguised as tax liberation, the legislation actually widened the gap between rich and poor, with the wealthiest citizens and the largest corporations still failing to pay their fair share in taxes. The loss of billions in personal and corporate tax revenue is reflected in the misery confronting urban America.

It is not only the poor who suffer from lost federal revenues. Those we often call "middle class" – really that section of the working class whose wages or salaries are high enough to keep them out of poverty and in some comfort – are struggling financially as the nation's economy staggers and the region remains in the grip of recession.

President and Congress share blame for urban decay

Access to federal dollars is also obstructed by the moronic 1990 congressional budget agreement, where Congress built an imaginary wall between domestic and foreign and military spending. This policy sleight-of-hand stops legislators from tapping the military budget to fund domestic needs. Despite the relaxation of tensions between the U.S. and its traditional rivals, Congress is locked into spending billions of dollars on a redundant military apparatus.

As much as responsibility for the plight of our cities lies with the Republican administration, the congressional Democratic leadership must assume some of the blame for offering scant opposition to programs that neutered possible federal intervention.

We need an urban agenda to chart a course of economic recovery for our cities. The Conyers bill (H.R. 3601) for housing, jobs and education, is a first step. And Governor Clinton's promise at the U.S. Conference of Mayors' meeting in Houston last week to appropriate $200 billion for creating jobs and rebuilding the cities is encouraging, if only for raising issues this campaign must address.

Conservatives are fond of saying their opponents only want to throw money at a problem. However, our cities are decaying precisely because money was withheld when federal intervention was desperately needed. A real solution requires federal dollars now. All the rest is rhetoric.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, July 11, 1992

Adopt Six-Point Program to Save Cities

It is a good time to talk about the cities.

Within days the Democratic Party will convene its national convention in Madison Square Garden, and world attention will be drawn to the contrasts between wealth and glitter and poverty and degradation that typify New York City. Several weeks later, when Republican party faithful gather in Houston, Texas, the unemployed and homeless who wander the former boomtown's streets will also contrast with the speeches about family values and the glitz funded by oil and construction money. These are fitting host cities for national conventions that will draw plans for the nation's future.

Common program for common needs

On the surface, the parties' business of nominating standard bearers to vie for the presidency is straightforward and predictable. Barring the unforseen, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton and President George Bush will lead their parties in the November elections. But beneath the surface, both Democrats and Republicans face the difficult task of directing and changing this nation.

And to win they have no choice. Polls show that the unimaginable can happen. A third party candidate with no articulated positions on any issue could be elected president. The American electorate is outraged at the leadership of the mainstream parties for mishandling the nation's domestic affairs. A scant 12 percent of registered Democrats voted in their party primary, and the president's approval rating is plummeting.

In order to win back the American voter, both parties must present a substantive platform for social and economic reform – one that addresses the needs of the nation and of urban America. And the campaign must persuasively argue that its candidates can implement these needed reforms once elected.

What follows is a modest suggestion of six planks for adoption by the major parties – if they are in fact looking for support from voters in large urban areas. In this election, all voters are critical, especially the tens of millions living in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and the other major cities of our nation.

Each party must pledge their candidate, if elected, to do the following:

- Reinforce the nation's commitment to equal opportunity by strengthening the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, allowing it to pursue cases of job discrimination in the public and private sectors.
- Preserve and increase Chapter 1 funding for public education, and increase overall federal funding of public elementary and secondary education.
- Provide full funding to Head Start. This early intervention program is universally recognized as one of the most effective efforts of the much maligned Great Society. It is worth defending, not trashing.
- Establish a national health care system that offers adequate care at a minimal cost to all citizens.
- Commit dollars and resources to invest in our urban areas. An urban "Marshall Plan" similar to that proposed by National Urban League President John Jacob and Michigan's Representative John Conyers can begin to reverse two decades of federal abandonment of the nation's core cities.
- Establish a national economic recovery plan that will create jobs with good wages in a diverse range of industries. Funding can come from savings realized in the reduction of military expenditures.

Core urban issues both parties could unite on

Support for equal employment opportunities, increased funding from Washington for Chapter 1 and public education, solid backing of Head Start, national health care, an urban Marshall plan, and real jobs at good wages – these are core urban issues that politicians could effectively unite around. Long after the last delegates leave New York and Houston, the problems afflicting our nation will still be there, and this simple program meaningfully addresses our most pressing urban needs.

Action, not rhetoric

Delegates can ensure that neither party walks away from its responsibility to address the wants of all our nation's people. The problems of this nation will not be solved by rhetoric, but by deeds and by investing in our people. America needs dynamic and visionary leadership, honesty and intelligence more than at any time since the Great Depression. The next occupant of the White House could lead us down the road to a renewal of the democratic principles upon which our nation was founded. Or, like Nero, he could fiddle while the cities burn.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, November 21, 1992

President-Elect: Rebuild Cities, Save Nation

After 12 years of presidential hostility to urban and social programs, we now have a leader in Bill Clinton who at least recognizes government's obligation to the cities, children and the dispossessed. But unless advocates for rebuilding urban America fight now with every available resource to get the administration's attention, we can lose the small advantage we have. And the president-elect, already focusing on the '96 election, may find himself a one-term president.

Certainly the election of additional African Americans, Hispanics and women opens possibilities for the inner cities. The Congressional Black Caucus, growing from 26 to 40 members, and the victory of Illinois' Carol Moseley-Braun – the first African American woman to sit in the U.S. Senate – promises needed change. And with the increase in the Latino delegation from 10 to 17, a maturing of minority political power in Washington suggests the new Congress could be much more supportive of urban needs.

Not surprisingly, however, a struggle is already going on over where the administration should focus scarce political and economic resources. It is a family battle the Democrats have waged before.

Leading Democrats often argue that the party's long-standing support for the poor, for labor unions, for increases in the minimum wage and other "traditional" party issues was responsible for repeatedly losing the White House. Following this logic, Candidate Clinton made few campaign stops in areas with large minority populations and talked only vaguely about improving conditions for the poor and the cities.

Certainly the president-elect did make some good paper proposals, promising apprenticeship training for young inner-city residents, universal health care for the millions of uninsured Americans, and the rebuilding of our nation's infrastructure to provide jobs and improve the quality of life. But because meeting city needs was not central to the campaign, and because urban programs take money, holding the new administration to its commitments will not be easy.

Aid to cities = healthy nation

The most important weapon urban advocates have is knowing that the new president and his congressional allies have little choice; we either solve the problems of the cities or the nation dies. Ignoring the cities while emphasizing the needs of the suburbs and a never well-defined "middle-class" was smart electoral politics that could make for disastrous government policy. If the riots in South Central Los Angeles proved anything, it was that aid to the cities is the only sure universal benefit.

More than residences and corporate headquarters, cities are economic generators for the nation. They and their suburbs are inextricably linked through jobs, infrastructure, education and culture. Suburban and urban social problems are increasingly the same, and suburban areas cannot thrive around a rotting urban core.

Save suburbs? Fund cities!

To be globally competitive, urban areas must be viable and livable. A vibrant Tokyo or Paris – lavishly underwritten by their national governments – is as central to its nation's international standing as a dysfunctional New York and L.A. are drags on this country's competitive capacity. Federal dollars earmarked to drug rehabilitation, mass transit, educational equity, and infrastructure repair – with apprenticeships targeted for people of color – is money well spent. It is cheaper than walling in the suburbs with police, private services and paranoia, if that is even possible. Funding the cities is an investment in the future.

Vital elements for first 100 days

On November 4, New York City's Mayor David Dinkins sent a strong, timely message spelling out a bottom-line agenda for urban survival. We join the mayor in suggesting elements for the new administration's 100-day agenda. These include:

- Increase Chapter 1 and other federal education dollars that give poor children a fighting chance to break out of poverty. Funds must be targeted to achieve equity in distributing trained teachers, books, supplies and other resources to the public schools.
- Craft a credible urban investment package, modeled on the Conyers bill, aiming federal dollars to create jobs, build affordable housing, and stimulate economic development in the inner cities.
- Develop the broad goals for a national health-care program, including emergency assistance to medically underserved communities.

Programs like these are not just good for poor people but essential if the United States is to be an effective leader in the new global economy. Certainly the administration will face opposition from those believing that government spending and a burgeoning deficit, not growing welfare rolls and festering cities, are the nation's paramount problems. But the battle for our cities and our future is a political fight that cannot be dodged. We can rebuild the cities together or fight it out amidst the ruins.

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Part Two

GUTTED BUDGETS AND RUINED LIVES

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, October 22, 1994

Who's Managing the (City) Store?

The voters bought candidate Rudy Giuliani's promise that he would be a better manager than the other guy. Is he? When faced with a budget gap – in the latest city scenario, $1 billion – a prudent manager would cut with care to preserve a functioning city. But for the past year, the mayor has acted like a zealot on a crusade. No matter where the cost overrun, he axes social services with little regard to impact.

We now have the worst of two worlds. Failing to manage the store, the mayor is at the same time closing the safety valves that keep the city from exploding. Let's look at the record.

• **Police Department**. A study by the nonpartisan Citizens Budget Commission proposes civilianizing Police Department jobs to save more than $19 million annually while putting more cops back on the beat. Instead of cutting the fat out of a bloated police bureaucracy, this administration institutes showy, expensive quality-of-life stunts like low-level drug sweeps.

• **Uniformed Services' Overtime**. While the original Giuliani plan projected a fall in overtime spending to $250 million, overtime payments actually rose this year to $521 million, more than $75 million over last year. The largest increase occurs in the Fire Department, with the police not far behind. *Newsday's* Michael Powell notes that correction officers in city prisons ran up an overtime bill of $10 million a month instead of the budgeted $49.5 million annually.

• **Youth Services**. In what is clearly a management breakdown, two Giuliani officials are brawling in public about how to run the Department of Youth Services. Earlier, the administration accused the agency of overspending during the waning days of the Dinkins administration. But Comptroller Alan Hevesi says the agency in fact has a surplus. While the mayor posed with the president in Washington, D.C. and stumped in Minneapolis for the crime bill, his aides were defunding some 150 nonprofit youth programs with track records – the very programs that keep volatile youth off the street and away from criminal activities.

• **Tax incentives**. The mayor complains about falling city tax revenues while doling out incentives in a ruinous bidding war with other localities to retain corporations that have no intention of leaving. Even the venerable Municipal Art Society opposes city plans to subsidize $1.8 billion in construction of an additional four-million square feet of office space for Times Square development, a bizarre project given that the city suffers from a 60-million square-foot glut in office capacity. Mayoral advisors are also seriously considering subsidizing the demolition of downtown office buildings, where the vacancy rate tops 30 percent.

Meanwhile the programs for the poor suffer. Multimillion dollar chunks are ripped from the Board of Education, leading to deferred maintenance of decaying schools and the layoff of 800 classroom aides. The Human Resources Administration is scheduled to take another $95 million hit, further skewing the balance of social workers needed to handle the caseloads of more than one million New Yorkers receiving public assistance. The Health and Hospitals Corporation, which runs the city's hospitals and clinics, has to slash $433 million this budget year, resulting in fewer municipal hospital beds and workers to serve largely poor constituencies.

No matter where the cost overrun, social services axed

Turning a blind eye to the needs of the city's most vulnerable residents will not save money or make problems go away. New York will pay heavily by losing federal and state reimbursement funds and by creating the perception of a menacing no-go zone that will drive away new businesses faster than incentives can entice them.

A soon-to-be released poverty report by my organization, the Community Service Society of New York, shows that, far from disappearing, the ranks of the poor are exploding. And they are getting poorer. More than one in six city residents qualifies as "extremely poor." That means 1.2 million New Yorkers are part of families living on less than $10,751 a year in a nation with a median family income of $38,000.

Attracting business?

Ignoring the problems of the poor amounts to criminal neglect. But even enlightened self-interest cries out for the city administration to deal squarely with poverty. Or are we prepared to accept a New York City that resembles Dickensian London: bands of orphans roaming the streets, infectious disease as close as a subway ride, homeless beggars camped in front of Trump Tower, desperate youths – with more firepower than Victorian England ever dreamt of – preying on citizens. With this kind of environment, how can the city hope to attract and keep world-class businesses?

There is still time for the administration to pull back from the brink of disaster and restore New York as the leader among cities it was meant to be. But once the fabric of society is shattered, there will be no repairing it.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, March 19, 1994

Layoffs Can Destabilize Minority Neighborhoods

Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's plan to close the $2.3 billion budget gap by firing city workers threatens the fragile stability of New York's minority communities. We are talking about the clerks, hospital and school lunch aides, emergency medical attendants and social workers, the working and middle-class people who are the glue that keeps these neighborhoods together. Cut them and their communities are in free fall.

By devastating our poorest neighborhoods, the mayor would put the entire city at risk. Recent history in Los Angeles and other major cities shows how easily conflict is touched off in neighborhoods stripped of jobs and hope.

Services to poor at risk

No matter how nicely packaged, the Giuliani layoffs target minorities. Because Blacks and Latinos form the bulk of city hires in the last two decades, and given the mayor's pledge not to thin the predominantly white police, firefighter and teacher ranks, the brunt of layoffs will affect the last-in, first-out minorities. These include a huge 3,600 job cut – almost half the total work force – in the Department of Social Services.

City University sociologist Stanley Aronowitz said that these layoffs will "deprive tens of thousands of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and women of a chance to work except in low-paid, part-time and temporary jobs." Family breadwinners, better role models for youth than drug dealers, and the solid core of poor neighborhoods already racked by record unemployment and welfare dependency, will be jobless unless the mayor's plans are changed.

Given the administration's shifting estimates about whom and how many they want cut, calculating the exact damage is impossible. The targeted 15,000 of the 214,000 jobs from mayoral agencies, the Board of Education, and the city-funded portion of the City University do not even include cuts from the Health and Hospitals Corporation or libraries, where more trimming is expected.

District Council 37, whose 130,000 members make up most of the city's employees, knows that its members, 60 percent of whom are Black and Latino, are at risk. These are the people who keep the hospitals, schools and social agencies working. Their average salary is $25,000 a year.

Unlike teachers, police and firefighters who are free to live outside city boundaries, those workers live in New York City and pay local taxes. As heads of households and community leaders, the threatened workers are part of our city's vitality. Is it too much for the mayor to act in a way that keeps New York from ripping apart at the seams?

None of this is to gainsay the need for fiscal restraint in the face of a huge budget shortfall. But it is shortsighted to propose layoffs without first seeking alternatives and resisting popular-sounding tax cuts. No matter how politically unpopular, commuter and dedicated gas taxes, residency requirements for all city employees and a more equitable real-estate tax structure are options that should be considered thoroughly.

Unless plans change, minorities will take brunt of city layoffs

Even the mayor's own budget is weighted with unnecessary expenses. From chauffeur-driven cars for Fire Department chiefs to underutilized sanitation workers, fat oozes from city government, and the mayor can do some judicious trimming. Former City Hall operations chief Harvey Robins proposed 99 ways to save money while getting the city to work better. Some, like eliminating redundant commissions and boards, consolidating agencies, capping vacation days, allowing greater flexibility in transferring employees and making other work-rule changes can be implemented without the cost of one current employee.

No free rides

If layoffs are necessary, they must be across-the-board. No free rides for the uniformed services – and their abysmal record on minority hiring – or for any city department. Giuliani has to act as the mayor of the whole city, not just of the thin majority of voters that elected him.

There is something unseemly about preaching the value of work while the mayor cuts back on jobs, opportunities, and hope. If we believe that work and regular, productive habits are central to a good society, and if we prize stability and freedom from crime in our cities, we cannot cut the ground from under those who stabilize our poorest communities.

Just as earlier generations of Irish and Italian immigrants got their first jobs in government when private industry turned its back on them, city employment has been vital in helping today's minorities succeed. Layoffs to this vulnerable population attack an already fragile social compact that keeps New York from self-destructing.

This is no attempt to artificially cast the budget debate in racial terms, although given New York's changing work force, that is how the jobs crisis plays itself out. The people who do those jobs should be nurtured and encouraged, regardless of their color. Layoffs should be the last recourse of competent government, not the first.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, December 3, 1994

Mayor's Budget Balancing Slams Poor – Again

By standing up to the mayor and producing their own – albeit modest – budget last week, the City Council acted like the responsible, independent legislative body envisioned when the City Charter was adopted five years ago. The council's statesmanlike plan to shift the financial burden away from vulnerable New Yorkers and onto agencies that can take the cuts is a good first step.

Yet even allowing for some $100 million in council modifications and restorations, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's plan to eliminate a $1.1 billion city budget gap through more job and service cuts will probably win the day. That is too bad. Like last June's ruinous effort to close another billion-dollar deficit by savaging city services and personnel, his budget-balancing strategy will cost some 20,000 more city jobs.

The mayor again wants to downsize areas like education and welfare, which employ sizable numbers of minority workers who are city residents, while leaving the mostly White (and nearly half nonresident) Fire and Police departments unharmed. The result: African Americans and Latinos, particularly women, will be forced onto public assistance, dragging themselves and their families one step closer to disaster.

And like last time, service reductions in health care, education and social services will hit the poor hardest.

Critics are lining up to denounce the cuts. Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines likened the threatened loss of 2,000 teaching and security positions to "standing at the edge of an abyss."

After the mayor proposed slashing emergency food assistance, Cardinal John O'Connor said the plans would sink poor New Yorkers below "rock-bottom standards demanded by human decency itself."

Mayor Giuliani retorts that, even after cutting, New York will spend more "on children, the elderly, people who are sick, people who are homeless, people with AIDS" than any other American city. That calculation is true for no other reason than more poor live here, and our cost of living ranks among the nation's highest.

Budget gaps our future?

The deficits are real all right. City comptroller Alan Hevesi warns that $400 million more must be found before June 30 to balance this year's budget. He forecasts a $2 billion shortfall next year, with a three-year combined $8.5 billion deficit starting July 1 – figures the mayor disputes. But Giuliani's own estimates show shortages of some $4 billion over the next three fiscal years.

Where will the dollars come from? Given their own mounting deficits and the tax-cut rage, only the most optimistic expect relief from Albany or Washington. While many of the factors driving city spending are caused by federal and state mandates, an unfavorable climate for cities in general (and this one in particular) means that demanding relief from outside won't work soon. Even the mayor's hopes for a one-shot $150 million boost in Medicaid income from Albany collapsed with the governor's reelection defeat, and Giuliani can count on little upstate help. Despite its sending more tax dollars to Washington and Albany than is ever returned, New York City must deal with its fiscal woes on its own.

Cleaning up our own house

Still, the city can avoid a deficit without tearing itself apart if it understands that budget balancing is smart fiscally and not a mindless numbers exercise. It must pass the humanity test of targeting those it will hurt the least while leaving the poor unharmed. As City Council speaker Peter Vallone said about the mayor's proposals, "Just as we cannot tax our way out of the fiscal problems, we cannot simply cut our way out either."

"Just as we cannot tax our way out of fiscal problems, we cannot simply cut our way out either."
—Council speaker Peter Vallone

That means making spending efficiency driven. The city must analyze how its business can be handled frugally while still delivering needed services. Their budget wrangling aside, neither the mayor nor council initiated such a study.

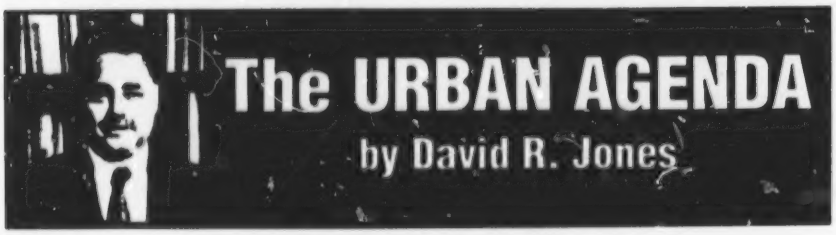
It's also time for the city to enhance progressive revenues. While unfashionable, calling for tax increases and fairness is inescapable. Only increases and restorations can provide for minimal services consistent with human decency.

Ideally, city spending – some would call it investing – should help the poor not just cope but escape from poverty. Prioritizing city spending would do that while not busting the budget.

Unfortunately, anyone trying to create alternative budgets is hamstrung by a chronic lack of information about city operating costs. Members of the public and even council leaders depend on the mayor's numbers, assumptions, interpretations and impact assessments. Given their monopoly on facts and expertise, the mayor and his circle hold all the good cards. They can and do make hash of critics who cannot definitively argue down his proposals.

To unstack the deck, the mayor and the City Council must implement the city Charter provision for a council budget office. Patterned on the Congressional Budget Office, it would keep tabs on all aspects of the city budget and offer analyses with integrity to serve as the basis for informed alternative budget proposals.

Because of time pressure to comment on the city budget, I am delaying my election analysis until the next column. Stay tuned.



Saturday, December 17, 1994

Let's Look at Revenues

Budget wrangling and lawsuits by the mayor and City Council over a sliver of the $31.6 billion budget won't solve the city's fiscal crisis. Cutting services and jobs without first correcting revenue shortfalls only makes our problems worse.

Shortfalls seen long ago

Members of the Financial Control Board, set up to oversee city finances after the 1975 fiscal collapse, warned the mayor back in July that his brand-new budget was bleeding red ink. Comptroller Alan Hevesi scored Giuliani's budget projections for understating agency overtime pay by hundreds of millions of dollars. Ray Horton of the watchdog Citizen's Budget Commission warned Giuliani his projected budget contained $1 billion in uncertain revenues and savings, including employee givebacks and state aid that had not materialized.

Shortfalls are likely to continue in the foreseeable future. So, it appears, will be the constant budget imbroglio between the mayor and the council, unless we can bring revenues and expenses into line. Twice this year revenue shortfalls created gaps filled by drastic and painful cuts. Just last week the mayor challenged the council to close yet another $400 million shortfall with one more round of cuts.

Counting former Mayor Dinkins' fall 1993 contingency cuts, city residents have been hit with over $2 billion in slashed health and day care, hunger, homeless, and youth services programs in a little more than one year. None of these draconian service cuts have closed the gaps.

Undeterred, the mayor keeps swinging his budget axe at city agencies, personnel and programs run by and for people who can least afford to lose them. As we said in an earlier column, spending cuts alone cannot solve our revenue crisis.

Adding insult to injury, Mayor Giuliani is proposing to give away tax credits to the rich and overprivileged. *Crain's New York Business* reports the administration is preparing to announce a major tax-incentive package to lure corporations to downtown Manhattan, an area that received considerable largess throughout much of the 1980s.

Such tax breaks to businesses and corporations are not smart business but ham-handed giveaways, corporate welfare that only worsens the city's revenue shortfall. As the Dec. 5 *Crain's* notes, it was similar incentives to downtown Brooklyn and midtown that "contributed to downtown's problems" originally. The tentative plan is already encountering opposition from business leaders who think preferential tax treatment to the Wall Street-Battery Park area will hurt midtown property owners.

Permanent budget planning

Certainly better accounting methods are needed to run New York. But it will take planners with vision as well as a capacity for numbers crunching to get the city out of this mess. One solution is to convene a blue-ribbon budget group charged with reordering the city's tax and spending system. Made up of public officials, union heads, leaders from the city's financial community and community based organizations, the panel would confront the city's continuing revenue shortfalls and come up with permanent ways to solve it.

Create blue-ribbon panel to reorganize city's taxing and spending system

They can start by reviewing two critical areas of the budget crisis. One is to release a needs assessment of what must be provided in the way of city services and programs. Second, it would report on how the city will pay for the services. This means placing all revenue sources on the table, including property, personal-income and – with Albany's concurrence – commuter taxes. Once their reports are completed, the city can arrive at a consensus on how to solve our spending and revenue problems.

Wall Street insider Felix Rohatyn, who helped bail the city out of the last fiscal crisis, said the mayor cannot end the structural deficit without help from the unions, the state, the Municipal Assistance Corporation and virtually everyone who deals with the city. He is right. All parties must share the burden of solving our revenue collapse.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, April 30. 1994

Put the Cops Back on Beat

Press coverage of corruption in Harlem's 30th precinct is sparking calls to restructure the police department. As long as we're talking about reforms, let's also look at overhauling the department so no dollars are wasted and honest cops are allowed to do real police work. A new report shows how civilianizing many police functions will save money and put more officers back on the beat. Such a move can also open the station-house doors to African Americans and Latinos cut from other city agencies.

An Unbeatable Combination: More Police Strength and Lower Cost, by the nonpartisan Citizens Budget Commission, argues that high-paid police officers are wasted on paperwork that can be done by others. With the city in a deep fiscal crisis, the report shows how the largely white police, fire and teaching staffs, as yet untouched by City Hall budget cutters, can be trimmed at the same time services are improved.

While the report is a detailed look at police operations, its conclusions are meant to apply to firefighters and teachers too.

Problem: High Cost, Low Enforcement

In a city plagued by violent crime, the CBC report asks some important questions. For example, why is there such a gulf between the total number of uniformed officers (nearly 31,000) and the department's daily "enforcement strength" of 10,491? Enforcement strength means officers on foot patrol, in cars, in specialized units and other posts – in other words, the cops actually doing police work.

This means that on an average day some 20,000 police are somewhere else. Where?

The answer is discouraging. Days off, wash-time, briefings, vacations, sick days and administrative assignments reduce an officer's availability for enforcement to only 157 days, for an "actual appearance rate of 43 percent."

The report asks why the Safe Streets, Safe City program, despite a hoped-for 29-percent expansion in personnel (and a massive 51-percent anticipated rise in enforcement strength) did not see real enforcement strength grow.

"Reductions in planned hiring," notes the report, "do not explain all of the reduction in planned enforcement strength," but they do explain "78 percent of the shortfall." It is "reductions in planned management improvements that explain the rest."

Solutions

So what must be done? Two proposals are made for greater civilianizing and rescheduling police tours.

Hiring civilians to free-up police saves money because city workers average far less pay than do uniformed officers. At current salaries, a civilian employee with one year's seniority earns $12,942 less than a comparably senior officer.

Also, such civilian jobs should go to minority New Yorkers hurt by city layoffs. As I wrote a few columns ago, these taxpaying city residents (of whom many police are not) are the lifeblood of Black and Latin communities. Hiring them helps stabilize working-class neighborhoods throughout the city. So does changing state law to mandate that future police hires be city residents. And adding some personnel of color will tie police stations closer to the neighborhoods they serve, making it easier for residents to cooperate with police in fighting crime. Today's disproportionate number of white officers (70 percent) and white supervisors (a staggering 86 percent) tells too many New Yorkers that the police cannot serve their interests.

Rescheduling tours means supporting the city's longstanding collective-bargaining position with the police union "to convert the current 243 tours of eight hours and 35 minutes into 253 tours of eight hours and 15 minutes," raising tours worked by 10 "and the appearance rate from 43 percent to 46 percent."

Less uniforms, more civilians = better policing and $$$ saved

In order to increase service and see financial savings, the CBC recommends civilianizing 1,481 positions, and raising enforcement strength by 440.

Proposals to institute higher service levels and reduce the uniformed staff through attrition, severance and, most of all, civilianizing, could create a leaner, meaner operation and be a model for the public schools and fire department.

Making Hard Choices

Because the real world of politics says that changing the revenue side through new taxes is unrealistic, cuts may be necessary. So the best we can do now is accept the CBC's compelling argument to downsize government fairly by shrinking the police, firefighters and school staffs while making them more efficient. Civilianizing desk jobs to put more police back on the beat makes sense, and creating more jobs in minority neighborhoods is vital.

I argued in that earlier column that if budget cuts are needed, they must be across the board. The mayor's proposed budget preserves three sacred cows from cuts – the largely white police, fire, and teaching staffs – while gutting programs employing and servicing people of color. With the city's fiscal crisis, no departments can be privileged. The CBC report shows how service, savings and fairness can guide public policy even in hard times.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, December 11, 1993

New York City for Sale?

A quick fix solves few problems, and cheap solutions to thorny questions come with hidden costs. An earlier column argued that plans to sell off the city's public hospitals would leave poor New Yorkers without health care. Now the new mayor is seeking to privatize other city services as well. Touted as the magic bullet for the city's fiscal ills and a projected budget deficit of more than $1 billion, the privatization mania is dangerous.

Whenever any organization reorganizes, we should ask: who benefits? Here, we must also ask if privatizing really lowers costs and improves service delivery for everyone.

False savings

Privatization means offering government-owned and operated property or services to private, for-profit organizations or nonprofits. As revenue-starved governments struggle with budget gaps and voters oppose tax increases, selling off city holdings to generate cash and cut city costs can be attractive. Supporters argue that private firms can perform services more efficiently and less expensively than government can.

Some defend privatization in principle. They don't claim the city necessarily performs poorly, but insist that services like transportation and garbage collection are things the private sector can and should profit from. Opponents say retailing vital city property and services is the municipal equivalent of selling body parts.

Privatizing city services is nothing new in this town. For decades New York City has contracted out more than half its social services operation to not-for-profit groups, private counselors and professional firms. In fiscal year 1993, the city set aside $2.8 billion, or nearly 10 percent of its total budget, for private sector contracts. Not all of them are mistakes.

Nonprofits can provide better services in homeless housing, foster care, and programs for the elderly that the city once did. But the motivation for transferring municipal social services is rarely to improve service. Transfers are driven by efforts to cut costs and are gained by employers who offer wages below those paid municipal workers. Their administrations are smaller and their unions (if they exist) less able to fight work-rule changes.

The shift to private employers initially offers city governments modest savings. The damage comes later. As municipalities continue to lose revenues through a loss of middle-class residents or business relocations, essential services such as police and fire take first priority. Contracted social services like foster care, youth programming or funding for hospitals become easy targets for the budgetary ax.

The mayor-elect wants to sell or lease at least four of the city's 11 publicly run acute care hospitals to voluntary not-for-profits. Other advocates of privatization call for selling the city's airports, jails, off-track betting operation, trash collections and even some bus routes.

The Health and Hospitals Corporation, which runs the city hospitals, guarantees health care for those who cannot pay for treatment. Proponents of selling or leasing HHC charge that the corporation operates inefficiently and adds to the city's budget woes. But a 1992 HHC study showed that, from 1985 to 1991, the cost of care at five private hospitals was 21 percent higher than at comparable HHC facilities.

Privatizing vital city services is municipal equivalent of selling body parts

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What will poor and working poor New Yorkers do when they become seriously ill and cannot afford the costs of a private hospital? Privatization enthusiasts say such people will be covered by Medicaid, Medicare, other third party payers, or by the state's bad debt and charity pool. Yet the pool pays only 80 percent of HHC's costs for the medically uninsured and only about one third of the costs incurred by voluntary and proprietary hospitals. Privatizing some city hospitals may endanger the city's ability to offer health care for poor people.

Burden of Proof

Because of the real possibility the poor will lose out, the burden of proof must be on the privatizers to demonstrate how their new system would mandate the same quality of care to the uninsured that is given to private patients.

Without this guarantee, privatization can only lead to improving at best the few, potentially profit-making city hospitals. After the voluntary hospitals finish creaming reimbursable patients, the public facilities that remain will be, as I have argued before, like the wretched St. James Infirmary, where the poor go to die.

If HHC is to be changed, then the privatizers should be forced to run every hospital. Take them all! Try to serve the public, not just skim the profits!

Part Three

GENUINE WELFARE REFORM

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, November 19, 1994

The Truth About the Poor

Conservative politicians may have won the lion's share of elections last week, but when it comes to governing there are some hard realities they cannot step around.

No amount of pretending will make proposals like housing children of unwed mothers in massive orphanages, ending all welfare supports, or withholding schooling and social services from immigrant youngsters cure what ails this nation. Now that they will actually have to produce, the right wingers in both parties must face the reality, not the stereotypes, about poor people, or they will poison civic life for all.

Clear look at problem

A new report by the Community Service Society of New York shows how widespread a problem poverty is and can help focus our energies toward real solutions.

Contrary to popular perception about the poor, *Poverty in New York City, 1993: An Update* shows poor New Yorkers living in small, increasingly two-parent families, using entitlements in far fewer numbers than they are eligible for, and growing poorer and more numerous. The report documents that 89.3 percent of all families on welfare have three or less children and that four out of 10 poor children live in households not headed by a single mother.

And against the fashionable opinion that "everybody" is on welfare and that it is easy to receive benefits, the report shows that almost half of all poor city families do not take from public programs aimed at assisting the poor – this despite city welfare rolls growing to a record 1.1 million. In 1992-1993, the years under review, a mere 54.5 percent of all poor families received any form of public assistance – the lowest rate of recipients since the mid-1980s. Nearly a quarter of poor children in 1992-93 were not covered by Medicaid or any other health insurance plan.

If that weren't bad enough, the number of very poor New Yorkers is also growing. While one in four New Yorkers is poor, one in every six city resident lives in extreme poverty, with family income far below the federal poverty threshold of $14,335 a year.

What the stats show

The report bases its analysis on the latest available statistics from the Census Bureau's March 1993 Current Population Survey. It illuminates the following stark statistics:

• New York City's poor population rose to 1.7 million in 1992, compared with 1.4 million in 1979. Nationally, the number of poor Americans grew to 36.9 million from 26 million during that time.

• The poverty rate in New York increased to 23.9 percent in 1992 from 20.2 percent in 1979. In the same period, the national rate increased to 14.5 percent from 11.7 percent.

• Of all poor New Yorkers, 75.3 percent are Black or Hispanic.

• Hispanic female-headed families reached a staggering poverty rate of 70 percent.

• While the elderly poverty rate dropped nationally from 15.2 percent in 1979 to 12.9 percent in 1992, in New York City it increased from 14.4 percent in 1979 to 19.8 percent in 1992.

Even most short-sighted will see how poverty threatens city's viability

• Children are more likely to be in poverty than the elderly: 38.5 percent of New York's youngsters are poor, compared with 21.1 percent nationally.

• Of these 661,700 poor children, nearly half are preschoolers.

• Hispanic children are most likely to be poor. In 1992, 57.3 percent were in poverty, a rate nearly three times greater than that of White children (19.7 percent).

This flawlessly clear and chilling portrait of poverty's scope and depth should make even the most short-sighted see how tenuous the city's viability is. The new men of power in City Hall, Albany and Washington need to understand that no one in New York will rest easy until the needs of the poor are squarely addressed. In the absence of statesmanship and intervention today, greater class and racial polarization will make New York into another Calcutta. A decaying metropolis dominated by the very rich and the very poor, it will offer little incentive for international companies and other employers to locate or even stay here.

Even though Americans are into fast food and instant political analysis, I'd like to reflect a little about the lessons of the just finished elections. My next column will cover what I think the response by communities of color and all concerned people should be to the new political configurations in Washington and Albany.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, August 20, 1994

Smoke and Mirrors Won't Reform Welfare

On the campaign trail, Bill Clinton made a promise to reform welfare. It is a promise he now cannot keep. The administration's bill to overhaul public assistance pleases neither conservatives nor liberals and certainly not those it purports to help.

True, welfare today has few defenders, and the system needs changing. Who would disagree with helping people get off public assistance, providing a good-paying job and making welfare less-than-permanent? That is why the administration's catchphrase, "making work pay," means inaugurating a whole series of expensive reforms. Because real reforms that give poor people real skills and real options cost real money.

Unfortunately, this bill doesn't do that. Clinton's call for time limits and workfare, all done on the cheap, is the wrong way to go. While Clinton campaigned on "ending welfare as we know it," his plan keeps intact those aspects we know too well – the poverty, the lack of education and training and the public disdain.

Two-Year Limit

Consider:

- The president's proposals, shepherded through the Senate by New York State's own Daniel Patrick Moynihan, offer a scant $9.3 billion over five years for job training. Congressional Black Caucus chairman Kweisi Mfume calls the bill's job-creation provisions "woefully inadequate." No meaningful private-sector job programs are contemplated. There are even penalties, like the threatened loss of medicaid, for refusing a low-paid private sector job and staying in the few public jobs the bill does promise.
- The bill has no provision for child care, vital if we are serious about getting people back to work.
- It does not provide a higher minimum wage.
- It allows the states to penalize recipients who continue to have children by denying them additional benefits.
- It would take effect regardless of whether universal health care passes this Congress. Many individuals stay on the public rolls precisely to ensure medical care for their families, and providing health care alone would reduce public rolls.
- The "two years and out" is a lifetime limit with no provision for people requiring assistance in the future.
- The Clinton plan requires teenage recipients to stay with parents regardless of how bad their home environment is.
- Funding for the new programs would come from beggaring other antipoverty programs, including those aimed at helping legal immigrants and at preventing evictions.

Conservatives especially like the two-years-and-out limit. Pennsylvania congressman Rick Santorum is sponsoring legislation more punitive than the president's package, to be financed by gutting immigrant assistance. Santorum is using his bill to curry support for his race as Republican nominee for the U.S. Senate.

A better House bill, by California congressman Robert Matsui, offers more dollars for training and no time limits. He has wisely attacked the administration for using "hot rhetoric" to win political points at the expense of poor children.

Bad Policy

But even Matsui's bill does not get to the heart of the matter. None offers the poor viable work options. Nor do they challenge the terrible racial stereotyping the poor face. The debates surrounding the three bills are only incidentally about policy. Using the poor as a political football, they are more about punishment, ideology and politics-as-pandering.

Clinton welfare advisor Mary Jo Bane says welfare reform is "about values...about work, about responsibility and about opportunity." That administration argument shares with conservatives the mistaken belief that people on welfare need more incentives to work (or disincentives to stay off assistance) than do the rest of us.

'Making work pay' means inaugurating real, expensive reforms. This bill doesn't do that

Predictably, conservatives go farther. Waging a life-style holy war against out-of-wedlock births, they argue that welfare itself is a disincentive to working, something the president does not yet say. But his bill and his spokespeople accept the conservative view that something is wrong with these people, something beyond the fact that they are poor.

Those of us who fight poverty every day know that this isn't a war to reclaim people's souls or characters from an inferior culture. It is instead a battle against the objective situation that people have problems that are largely not of their making and need help.

White House economics advisor Gene Sperling says the president's bill "has to be one of the things that defines us." No president should be defined by this bill.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, February 27, 1993

Real Welfare Reform Means Creating Real Jobs

Welfare reform, a highlight of the 1992 campaign, is now a part of the Clinton administration's domestic program. In his February 17 address to Congress, the president pledged to "offer a plan to end welfare as we know it." Welfare, the president believes, should be made short-term, supportive and transitional, helping recipients acquire the job skills enabling them to provide for themselves and their families.

"We have to end welfare as a way of life," Clinton told the nation, "and make it a path to independence and dignity."

Real vs fake reforms

Does the welfare system need reforming? Absolutely! Public assistance grants pay too little, are administratively costly and do not help enough people find and keep viable jobs. Yet the various government welfare programs are among the few supports poor women and their children have. While public assistance needs overhauling, change must not come at the expense of its clients.

Some think improving the present welfare system only means instituting tough measures forcing mothers off public assistance. They talk about the reciprocal obligations of the poor for the pittance they receive, while calling themselves "reformers" guided by "new thinking." I believe this new president is better than that.

Many of Clinton's proposals are excellent. He calls for investments in education, training, health care and child care to supplement cash grants so that recipients become permanently self-sufficient. He also proposes expanding the earned income tax credit and increasing the minimum wage, measures which would raise poor working families' incomes. And the administration's desire to crack down on delinquent fathers for child support payments would also improve the income of poor single mothers and their children. With adequate funding and planning, such steps can bring results.

But before we agree to any changes, which the president argues will transform public assistance into a vehicle for empowerment and not simply a cheaper system to manipulate the poor, several key problems need to be addressed.

Two years not enough

First, the two-year transitional period that the president put forward is not enough time for most single mothers to acquire the education, skills and self-confidence they will need to reach an income level that can support a decent standard of living for themselves and their families.

Many recipients have profound educational, physical and psychological deficits. They often have neither work skills nor a work history. A large number are high school dropouts. All have pre-school or school-age children – often both. How well will a mere two-year program help them?

And where will the jobs at the end of the transition period come from? Will the private sector in places like Connecticut, Michigan, and Southern California – areas hard-hit by defense cutbacks, auto-plant closings and layoffs in high-tech industries – possibly reorganize enough to accommodate an influx of poorly educated, low-skilled single parents with income and benefit needs exceeding those offered by entry-level salaries?

If the private sector cannot provide jobs for people thrown off the welfare rolls, and if present benefit programs are slashed, then the government must create jobs. Otherwise poor single mothers and their children will starve. Certainly some bloodless economist might cheer seeing the poor "falling back on their own resources," but forcing growing numbers of young mothers and their children to sleep in the streets, beg, or commit petty crimes to survive threatens the nation as a whole.

Either create jobs or be responsible for the firestorm

A well-funded, long-term program providing jobs at decent salaries and benefits with training and support services would be applauded and attractive to many welfare recipients. The danger in the president's tentative proposals is that, by projecting only a two-year transition period, welfare recipients without private-sector jobs will either be dropped altogether or shunted into phony make-work positions, with no benefits, sick days or opportunity for upgrading. Such an outcome would be worse than the current flawed welfare program.

Spend $$ for results

Welfare reform is politically popular not only because it looks like a bold way to make the poor productive, but because it aims to save public dollars. But as a recent *Washington Post* editorial notes, making public assistance recipients financially independent cannot be a money-saving proposition in the short run – not in time for the next round of elections, as envisaged by the new administration. Reforms will only work, say the editors, if new programs are adequately funded and long-term.

The adage, "God is in the details," suggests that urban advocates not be quick in signing on to the president's reforms until we know exactly how well he will fund his programs. And fund them he must. We either spend money today on real welfare reform, or we pay more later to put out an urban firestorm, with embattled police, battered lives and dashed hopes.

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The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, January 15, 1994

Tight Budgets and Poor-Bashing Shape Welfare Debate

President Clinton's welfare reform panel offered a recent glimpse of its tentative proposals. One glance is enough to know that, for millions of women and children mired in poverty, more trouble is on the way.

If recommendations to time-limit assistance and make work mandatory in all cases are not drastically modified, millions of low-income women and children will suffer. Buttressed by rhetoric about the alleged sins of the poor, the panel's proposals are trial balloons in anticipation of a full presentation expected this spring. All the more reason to change them now.

Charged with developing a plan that encapsulates Clinton's campaign pledge to "end welfare as we know it," the president's Working Group on Welfare Reform, Family Support and Independence is calling for changes in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program that aim more at solving budget problems than at creating a better and more equitable social welfare system. The working group seems to be calling for a deficit-neutral welfare reform program – i.e., a system that operates on the cheap. It is pure fiction to believe we can have a better welfare system without a substantial investment in money and people.

The prescription for putting all adult recipients still unemployed after two years into work programs or unpaid work-experience slots is not only undesirable, it is unrealistic. The number of people who would need jobs, the associated costs of setting up and maintaining these programs, and the effects such programs will have on single mothers and their minor children has to be calculated precisely before we jettison the present system.

That is not to say we should be satisfied with welfare as we know it. Financially starved and badly administered programs hurt the people they are meant to help. But new procedures that recycle every negative and punitive idea about welfare reform are wrong. They will not work and should not work.

Alternative even worse

Unfortunately, the sharpest criticism of Clinton's plan is coming from those who want to make welfare even more punitive. A House Republican plan incorporates virtually all of the negative ideas about welfare reform. It includes time-limited welfare followed by a work requirement and would permit states to cut recipients from the rolls after five years. It mandates state imposition of sanctions and paternity determination rules. It allows states to dictate behavioral control measures, and it would eliminate almost all welfare benefits for noncitizens – including legal immigrants.

Who would argue with the idea that people who can work should work? But there must also be a social safety net that protects children and their families for whom employment is impossible or impractical. Arbitrary time limits for cash assistance destroy that protection.

If work is central to welfare reform, then real jobs must be provided, and these new workers should receive wages and benefits in return for their work. That is different from "workfare," where people paid off of a grant do not receive a real wage, health care or vacation time, some of the fringe benefits associated with a real job.

True reform = spending $$$ for training, job creation, and real social work

At its hearings, the welfare reform panel asked advocates bluntly, "How should a program of time-limited assistance followed by work be structured?" The answer should be just as blunt – There must be no time limits on assistance unless certain guarantees are in place. These guarantees must include:

- jobs that pay wages for everyone who cannot find work
- determination of a recipient's employability made by qualified professionals
- exemptions that are reasonable and clear
- an adequate safety net to cover any unintended negative consequences of the new policy.

The group of 87 Congress members who wrote to the president were right to denounce time limits "because they fail to take into account individual circumstances, the needs of dependent children and the failure of the economy to generate decent jobs." Isolating how new legislation affects real people and whether children are helped or harmed by statutory changes must be reform's real bottom line.

Solutions

In the oncoming debate, we must not lose sight of that fact that any new programs need to affect real people positively. Of the more than one million public assistance recipients in New York City, more than 500,000 are children. Getting them and their parents off welfare means investing time and money in job training and job creation, education, childcare, and extensive professional case management, i.e., real social work. A concerted federal effort to reform welfare that takes this approach will deserve our support. It is what the president promised in his election campaign. But a program that savages the poor deserves to be defeated.

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Part Four

EDUCATION THAT WORKS

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, September 17, 1994

Make Schools Harder, Not Easier

Why do so many young people of color get shunted into remedial education programs? More to the point, why do so many fail?

Experts agree that remedial work cuts both ways. While it teaches adults skills they weren't ready to learn as children, it also stigmatizes younger participants. If the system considers you "stupid," how do you then work to be "smart?"

New evidence shows that instead of dumbing down students, schools should smarten them up. That means setting tough standards and allocating generous resources to create a serious educational environment that helps students achieve long-term goals. Because what we expect of young people – and what we are willing to spend on public education – can determine whether they succeed or fail.

Graduating Black Engineers

One place where educators are demanding top performance and getting it from their students is at Atlanta's Georgia Institute of Technology. There, graduation rates for fully trained Black and Latino engineers are phenomenal.

After the campus junked its old remedial-orientation program, minority Tech students enrolling in its summer immersion courses did better than their White classmates in this largely White college. The rigorous five-week sessions were tough, but they toughened students as well.

Now Georgia Tech graduates more than 70 percent of its minority students – double the average for all engineering schools. *The New York Times* (June 29, 1994) cites its other accomplishments: It "ranked fifth in 1993 in issuing undergraduate engineering degrees to Blacks [behind four historically Black colleges].... As recently as 1991 (it) ranked first in awarding masters' degrees in engineering to blacks, just ahead of the historically black Howard University in Washington." This is a school that wants its students to succeed and isn't afraid to make them want it too.

Why not the best?

Georgia Tech's is only the latest in a series of success stories reported on before. Back in 1991 Alice Uzoaga, then principal of predominantly Black P.S. 21 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, told how her staff set a tone that was turning the school around. With most children there poor enough to qualify for free lunches and with half of the children's parents receiving welfare, this school ought to have been an underachieving educational nightmare. It was not.

"When children are not succeeding, you have to look at what is going on in the school," Uzoaga told reporter Nick Chiles. "That's where the onus is, not on parents, not on the environment, not on the neighborhood. The responsibility lies with the educator, from the administrator right down to the building custodian.... I would not blame poverty for children not succeeding. I cannot do that." (from *Prism: A Periodic Report on Race and Politics in New York City*, CSS, July 1991.)

Dr. Leo Casey of Brooklyn's Clara Barton High School for the Health Professions can also claim success. Working with school principal Jerry Resnick in this largely African American and African Caribbean school, Casey trains inner-city youngsters to debate issues central to the Constitution and American democracy.

"These kids give up their weekends and even some holidays. They're bright and they're willing to work hard," Casey said. State champs for two years running and all college-bound, they have done well.

What we expect of young people, and what we spend on their educations, determines whether they succeed or fail.

Instead of making excuses for their kids or expecting them to fail – reasonable outcomes in very poor communities – Uzoaga, Casey and Resnick demanded excellence from their kids. They got it.

A Key to Educational Reform

Young people need a whole shopping basket of resources to succeed. An orderly school climate with strong leadership and targeted money for state-of-the-art equipment, salaries and school supports for excellent teachers only top the list. In fact, even talking about standards is a fraud if resources are not spent to help meet those standards. New York City Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines's ambitious plan to raise high-school math and science requirements will collapse if school funding is cut any further.

But while targeting dollars is crucial – and we must continue to fight hard for them – it is not sufficient to make the revolution in education we need. What is lacking in too many educational settings is the set of high expectations serious institutions must place on their students.

When children fail, it often isn't because they're not bright, but because they're not challenged. Many never had to succeed before. But by treating their students seriously, demanding they be better and getting the best from all their students, Atlanta's Georgia Tech and Brooklyn's P.S. 21 and Clara Barton High School point the direction educational reform can take.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, July 17, 1993

Advice to Future Schools Chancellor

Just when you think things are calming down in the city's public education system, the roller coaster starts up again.

After the tumultuous and rancorous ouster of schools chancellor Joseph Fernandez, the hurried search for a new education chief is on hold. Ethnic elbowing, mayoral politics, candidates who first say yes, then no, then maybe, and a process that began at break-neck speed will now creep along for months following Fernandez's departure. Meanwhile the problems the city's kids face are still here.

I had a first-hand look at how the education system works when I was appointed as one of the mayor's representatives to the chancellor's search panel. I got to see up front the problems any new chancellor will face.

Multitude of problems

Here are just a few of the things that must change:

- African American and Latino children, especially boys, are shunted off to special education programs when what they need is a real education. Meanwhile, the children who genuinely need special ed classes get badly organized, underfunded programs instead.
- Tracking, which notoriously discriminates against poor youngsters, still goes on. New school-choice programs that begin this fall will only make tracking worse, threatening the few solid programs that still exist.
- Graduation rates are dismal. And of the graduates, many take more than four years to finish.
- School buildings are old and crumbling. Asbestos and other health hazards abound.

When you add to these the uncertainty of a teachers' strike, the interim school chief will be swamped. Even the permanent chancellor, once the board gets around to appointing one, will have his hands full.

New framework needed

No one expects miracles overnight. But what can help restore public confidence is a new chancellor making clear that he or she is guided by some overarching principles that can get real results. Let me list four.

The first is the absolute need to fund schools fairly. Schools that need more must get their share, not be starved when equitable funding will allow them to do wonders for poor children. The new chancellor will have to be a strict disburser of funds here in the city and a champion of the schools' needs in Albany and Washington. A larger share of the state and federal education budgets must come to the city now. And better targeting of Chapter 1 dollars, which go to only 60 percent of all eligible city children, must be a chancellor's priority.

A second principle is an unswerving commitment to treating parents as partners in education, not as enemies or interfering amateurs. Low-income parents in particular should not be seen as either hostile or apathetic. And they are certainly not the barriers to better education that some administrators believe them to be. Parents, with the greatest stake in improving education, can make a tremendous impact on how children learn. They should be respected and utilized.

Equitable funding, parent support, recruiting and retaining teachers, and children respecting each other are vital

Third, we have to go beyond simply recruiting more people of color to educate New York's public school children, of whom 80 percent are minorities. Developing a competent and committed teaching core that is better representative of the background and experiences of New York's children will happen only when there are programs in place allowing these young teachers to stay in the system. New York City's annual teacher turnover rate is almost double the state's average. New programs that monitor teachers' progress, offer advanced education courses at local school sites, and allow uncertified teachers to receive the training and course work they need to become qualified will again make public schools real places to learn.

Lastly, we have to graft a fourth "R" onto the core reading, writing and arithmetic curricula – respect. New York has always been an immigrant city, and the Board of Education shows this trend continuing with its reporting a more than 27 percent increase in immigrant children from 166 countries between 1991 to 1992. The schools will not work if young people do not firmly believe that everyone belongs here, that every child is a potential friend and ally.

I don't envy anyone this job. But if the man or woman who eventually runs the city's sprawling school system is guided by these four basic principles, and has the administrative capabilities to guide action effectively, the city's children will be the real winners.

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The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, October 24, 1992

Don't Blame Public Schools, Mr. Quayle

After Vice President Quayle blamed his own intellectual failings on his being "the product of the public schools," I realized that those of us who support quality public education are in for a long, hard fight.

People of color know first-hand that our schools need aid, not gratuitous criticism. Underfunded, staffed more and more by inexperienced teachers, and needing good science laboratories and modern textbooks, public schools are still places where children can learn when parents, teachers, administrators, as well as local and national leaders care.

The success of the city's own Bronx High School of Science, which continues to hold national records for producing Westinghouse Fellows and Nobel Laureates, shows what wonders can be accomplished when leaders committed to public school excellence merge adequate funding with educational vision.

First equity, then choice

The White House and many in Congress are peddling "school choice" as the new educational panacea. Packaged as a "reform," choice would only skim off the best, most motivated and prepared children. "Schools will be choosing them, not the other way around," wrote Billy Tashman in *New York Newsday* (September 24) and all this competition between schools will come at the expense of deserving youngsters of all colors.

The schools do not need to be savaged or auctioned in an estate sale, leaving only the best and the brightest inner-city youngsters to benefit from a bidding war by the remaining schools. Until each and every neighborhood school receives the resources to become excellent, most schools will become dumping grounds for children whose parents did not have the connections, the necessary time, drive, or requisite information to give their kids a "choice."

In the city's high schools, where choice already exists, no educational improvements are evident – witness Brooklyn's Eastern District High School, whose parents led a school boycott protesting violence, overcrowding, shortages and declining numbers of graduates.

The real culprits are today's federal, state, and local policies of grossly underfunding, understaffing, and undereducating African American and Latin kids. (Another problem, how teachers are assigned and who teachers are accountable to – certainly not parents in poor and minority neighborhoods – will be discussed in a future column.)

Origins of problem

Only six cents of every dollar spent on public education nationwide comes from Washington; the rest comes from local and state support. Wealthier communities boast tidy schools with small classes, up-to-date textbooks and experienced, committed and decently paid teachers. Larger municipalities, partly because of the many basic city services they must supply, have less to invest in schools.

New York City's annual investment of $6,644 per pupil ranks well below the state average of $7,337 and is dwarfed by the state's top five districts, which spend more than $27,000 per pupil on education. Thus schools in the same state – often in neighboring communities – contrast widely in their capacity to motivate, educate and serve children. How can politicians expect comparable outcomes from students when present funding patterns lavishly reward some children while depriving others? These separate districts must either cooperate or consolidate in sharing resources among New York's 760 state school districts so every child is offered the best possible education.

Reauthorizing Chapter 1

Because of inadequate funding from federal sources and state and local taxes, programs like Chapter 1 were developed in the 1960s to help poor youngsters. Due for Congressional reauthorization next year, Chapter 1 provides extra funding to give additional services to poor children who are farthest behind in school. It supplements, but cannot supplant, adequate local and state programs. In the crush of a nationwide recession and federal policies that harm the inner cities, reauthorization and full funding for Chapter 1 is vital.

"Choice" means holding pens for poor children

Sadly only half of all eligible children receive Chapter 1 services. And while funding is a $6.2 billion appropriation, a fully funded Chapter 1, restored to its initial 1969 funding level, would pump $31 billion into a faltering educational system. Such renewed support would create a climate of learning in which no one – least of all our second most-powerful elected official – could blame his deficiencies on public education.

Real reforms needed

Without a commitment to increased and equitable aid for education, sham reforms like choice will benefit only a handful of youngsters, while the vast majority are herded into educational holding pens to await the grim future facing all unskilled Americans in the 21st Century. As a nation, we can do better than that.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, May 18, 1992

Educate and Save the Next Generation

In the wake of outrage over the Rodney King verdict, Mayor Dinkins met with more than 100 young New Yorkers to sound their reactions on how and why the criminal justice system has failed to protect African Americans. The Mayor told the young leaders, "You can be anything you want to be, you really can!" He failed to offer them any practical suggestions on how, in the face of institutional racism, they could overcome ghetto life, poverty, joblessness and discrimination. How can the young overcome poor education, poor housing and a lack of job training – conditions tolerated by a society and by political powers over whom they have no control?

System Cheats Students

Education is one of the key instruments determining a child's life-chances. Everyone agrees that if American political leaders really wish to avoid losing a generation of inner city youth, the schools must be radically reformed. Yet New York City's public school system, charged with educating more than 930,00 children, is in disrepair and disrepute. The Save Our Schools Campaign report, *What's Missing In Our Schools*, sent to the mayor and City Council, estimates that 27,000 additional trained personnel are needed to meet minimum staffing standards in the public schools. The report calculates the schools are short 12,000 classroom teachers, 1,400 guidance counselors, 900 school nurses and health aides, 450 trained librarians and other necessary staff.

No Bricks Without Straw

While public education is under attack nationally, children in the inner cities are most severely shortchanged in terms of teachers, equipment and services. In 1987, as president of the Community Service Society of New York, I directed a study of the flow of funds intended to enhance the education of children from low-income families. The CSS investigation compared the per-child amount allocated to New York City's lowest income community school districts – overwhelmingly African American and Latino – to other city school districts. Our researchers found that the poorest districts were consistently shortchanged. At the time of the study, these districts also received less per-child of monies allocated for remedial and enhancement programs.

Worse, these districts received less than their fair share of dollars specifically intended to finance some educational programs for financially disadvantaged children.

These children are further victimized by policies where the most experienced teachers do not work in schools where the need for them is greatest. School districts whose children are predominantly white and middle class get the best teachers. The 1991 report of the New York State Legislature's Marchi Commission, *Governing For Results: Decentralization with Accountability*, revealed that in 1990-1991:

> Schools with higher percentages of pupils from families on welfare have less well-educated, less experienced, and lower percentages of tenured teachers compared to schools with lower percentages of pupils with families on welfare. In addition, schools with higher percentages of minority pupils have less well-educated, less experienced, and lower percentages of tenured teachers compared to schools with lower percentages of minority pupils.

Poor children get less – not more – school aid

These glaring inequities are not unique to New York City. In 1990, RAND Corporation researcher Jeannie Oakes found that poor African American and Latino children did not have access to books, teachers, curricula and equipment needed to study mathematics and the sciences. Millions of poor children are being systematically deprived of the basic education required to qualify for decent jobs in modern society.

Asleep at the Switch

Too many policy makers and educators justify the inequitable distribution of critical educational resources that deprive poor and working class students of equal treatment in America's classrooms. Some cynically say that the problems of poor children are too severe to be remedied by schools, that such children "will never learn" and never succeed, and that money is wasted on needy youngsters. But there are many schools where poor and minority children thrive and excel. Why? Because there is educational and political leadership combined with adequate and equitable funding that provides learning opportunities to insure the future that Mayor Dinkins envisions. If we want to badly enough, we can restore this city's once famous public school system that educated millions of newcomers, Black and White.

My next column will address practical educational reforms that can make the mayor's dream a reality, not just for some but for all of New York City's children.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, May 23, 1992

Three Steps to Improving Education

Minority youngsters are still riding in the back of the school bus 30 years after Rosa Parks won her fight. In the inner cities, schools fail to teach basic reading and arithmetic, much less equip students with the skills needed to thrive in an advance technological society.

A combination of official neglect and steering of educational funds has disinvested in our children's education and damaged their hope for the future.

In my last column, I outlined how the educational system denies poor, African-American and Latino children equal educational opportunities. These children have less access to the books, experienced teachers, curricula and equipment needed to succeed. While these children need more, they get less.

Gimmicks instead of substance

Educational experts are currently debating how to achieve educational excellence without increasing spending. Two unproven solutions – "national standards and testing" and "school choice" – are being peddled as the answer. Yet the central issue of equity in distributing the educational system's resources to every American child is given short shrift.

Choice in particular is not a vehicle for improving education to inner-city and poor children. It is rather a thinly veiled effort to loot the public treasury to enrich failing parochial schools in the North and White-separatist private schools in the South. A few of the best, brightest, most ambitious, and malleable African American and Latino children would be skimmed out of underfunded public and into subsidized private schools, signaling the end of democratic public education. Poor children of all colors would be stranded and doomed to fail. Some choice!

Yes, educational excellence should be our goal. And yes, private and parochial schools should provide increased scholarships to inner-city kids. But we will never get there by abandoning public education. We must first "level the playing field" and see that every child receives the educational support he or she needs to do well.

Reforms that work

Gimmicks such as choice are not needed. Current educational programs will work if not sabotaged by gutting their funds. Preserving Chapter 1 funding, fairly distributing state school aid, and developing a National Teachers Corps are programs worth fighting for.

Chapter 1 dollars are the primary source of federal aid to education, intended to pay for compensatory education for poor and educationally disadvantaged children. Scheduled for Congressional reauthorization in 1993, Chapter 1 must be preserved.

Some critics urge using Chapter 1 dollars to fund a school choice initiative. Such tampering with Chapter 1 program violates the intent of Congress when it passed the law in the mid-1960s and would be disastrous for the children it serves.

Implementing fair funding

New York State's current school-aid distribution formula benefits suburban districts while hurting urban districts. New York City receives only 34 percent of all statewide aid while educating 37 percent of the state's children. For the 1991-92 school year the city was underfunding approximately $380 million in school aid, money city schools desperately need.

Still in the Back of the School Bus

A National Teachers' Corps is vital because the shortage of teachers and a lack of credentialed and certified math and science teachers denies public school children a quality education. School districts with educationally disadvantaged and at-risk students traditionally have a difficult time recruiting and retaining well-qualified teachers.

A solid investment in our children's future, the corps would be designed specifically to attract dedicated and resourceful college-bound students to the teaching profession. In return for a commitment to train and teach in a subject area where certified teachers are in short supply, or a pledge to teach in a school district where certified teachers are difficult to recruit and retain, the federal government would provide students with full-tuition college scholarships.

Tolerating inequities

Policymakers and elected officials who tolerate, if not actually support, rampant school resource inequities are largely to blame for the inexcusable treatment poor children inevitably receive. We need practical, fully-funded public programs that educate children in common, treating every child as educable and valued. Our children deserve no less.

Part Five

HEALTH CARE FOR THE POOR

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, June 20, 1994

Health Care for All

At $2,666 per person, the United States spends more on health care annually than any other nation in the world. Yet many Americans get nothing for this money. In every other advanced industrial nation, with the exception of White-supremacist South Africa, national health programs guarantee everyone access to medical care. But in our country, health care is not a right. It is a privilege reserved for those who can afford it.

Thirty-eight million people under the age of 65 have no health care insurance – no Medicaid, Medicare or private health insurance. Another 10 million are inadequately insured. More will be unprotected as health care costs increase and employers drop or cutback on employee insurance benefits.

Who are the uninsured? About a third of the 2.3 million uninsured New Yorkers are children. Poor and low-income state residents are three times more likely to lack health insurance than others in the population. Black, Latinos and Asians are twice as likely to be uninsured as are Whites.

Why are people uninsured?

More than two thirds of Americans with health insurance are covered through employer-based plans. The remainder pay their own premiums or are Medicare and Medicaid recipients. But most of the 38 million uninsured are working people or their dependents whose employers do not provide health coverage. The crisis in health care coverage is based on this nation's over-reliance on employer-based health insurance.

Private coverage grew in the post-World War II period when large employers offered generous health packages to unionized workers – often in place of wage increases – and a large section of the American people got decent medical care for the first time.

But from the mid-60s on, health care benefit costs to employers rose dramatically – from 2 percent to 6 percent of the average company's payroll – forcing employers to drop health benefits.

Small businesses, which now employ the majority of uninsured workers, often operate with low profit margins and find employee health costs prohibitive. Insurers often deny coverage to entire industries whose jobs or employees are considered high-risk. Small companies also have difficulty renewing affordable coverage once a group member incurs an expensive claim.

Another large segment of the uninsured are the poor. Yet Medicaid, established in 1966 to provide health care for the poor, has absurdly low income-eligibility levels that exclude 50 percent of poor people nationwide. And because of scandalously inadequate doctor reimbursement rates, only 15 percent of this state's physicians accept Medicaid patients.

New York has evolved a two-class health system, where the privately insured have access to excellent doctors, while the uninsured and Medicaid recipients must rely on teeming hospital emergency rooms.

And Medicare, the health program for the elderly, does not pay for prescription drugs, preventive and long-term care, and some other needed services. Its co-payment and deductible provisions burden needy seniors with large out-of-pocket expenses.

Insured get unneeded treatment – Poor denied basic care

While the uninsured are refused basic care, better-off, insured Americans often receive superfluous treatment. Studies reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that 14 percent of all coronary artery bypasses and 20 percent of pacemaker implants surveyed were unnecessary.

Everyone covered

The solution is clear. This nation needs to replace its failing multipayer private system with a system like that used in Canada, where one payer –the federal government – allows all citizens the same excellent coverage.

Last November, Democrat Harris Wofford won an upset Senatorial race in Pennsylvania because of his support for universal health coverage. Yet neither the federal government nor any state legislature has approved a public insurance bill to date.

New York State Assembly health committee chair Richard Gottfried is sponsoring a Canadian-style plan, called "New York Health" to provide health insurance coverage for every New Yorker. The Assembly could pass this commendable bill by early July. Passage by the Assembly alone would send Washington a powerful message, demanding that all Americans have health care coverage.

It is about time this country ended its elitist medical practices. Access to health care as a right must be the foundation of any national health policy.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, June 13, 1992

Primary Health Care Needed Now

Among the most advanced medical centers in the world, New York City is a leader in every aspect of medicine – except one. New Yorkers living in low-income communities have almost no access to primary medical care, the basic health provision most Americans take for granted. The raging epidemic of medical problems in our inner cities forces the poor into overcrowded emergency rooms that are no substitute for comprehensive and less costly treatment.

What is primary care?

Primary care means preventive care, basic diagnosis and early treatment. It can be provided by a general practitioner, family practitioner, general internist, general pediatrician, an obstetrician/gynocologist in community practice or even specially trained physician assistants and nurse practitioners. Primary care also covers referring patients to specialists when necessary, coordinating and monitoring patients' in-hospital care, and is available 24 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week. This type of care is dangerously missing from most low-income communities.

The Community Service Society examined primary care services available to the 1.7 million residents of nine of the lowest-income areas of the city, taking into account the primary care available in hospital outpatient clinics, community health centers, and by office-based physicians. It found that only 500 more primary care doctors were needed to adequately serve these communities – not a great deal for a wealthy society to provide if it wanted to. What is worse, CSS noted that only 28 of the area's 700 office-based physicians could provide adequate care. The remaining physicians lacked hospital admitting privileges, 24-hour coverage, and had short office hours. Some did not even accept Medicaid patients.

The New York City Health Systems Agency reports that low-income people are admitted to hospitals seven times more often than are middle- and upper-income people for 14 conditions that can be treated effectively on an ambulatory basis. Diabetes, asthma, and heart failure account for 68 percent of the differences between the populations.

Too many specialists

American medicine has its priorities backward, stressing specialized medicine at the expense of basic treatment. Too few primary care doctors are produced – along with far too many specialists – in New York City and throughout the nation.

Primary care gets short-changed because medical schools and teaching hospitals put their emphasis on research and specialization training. Both public and private systems of health insurance reinforce and reward this practice by paying primary care doctors much less than the more technologically oriented specialists. Family practitioners earn an average of one-half the income of radiologists, and other specialists command even higher pay

500 more primary care doctors needed in poorest areas

Another disturbing aspect of medical school practices is the refusal to recruit and train those students likely to provide care in the poorest communities. Today's students most interested in this type of practice are African Americans, native-born Latinos and students from large urban areas. New York-area medical schools' records in training minority students is abysmal. In a city where more than 50 percent of the population is Black or Latino, only 11 percent of the medical school class of 1991 was from these groups. And more than two-thirds of the students entering one of the city's seven medical schools come from suburban areas, small cities and towns or rural communities. As a consequence, virtually none of the physicians offering primary care in the nine city neighborhoods studied by CSS are graduates of New York area medical schools.

Finally, the cost of serving in a low-income area makes it nearly impossible to set up and maintain a practice there. Medicaid reimbursement averages a paltry $11 per visit. Uninsured patients often cannot pay part or even all of the full charge.

With little incentive to learn or practice general medicine, and with access to medical school highly restricted, it is not surprising that a scant four percent of New York's medical graduates plan to enroll in family practice residencies. Compare this to the 17 percent in Ohio, or the 15 percent in California. Yet New York has no problem producing new doctors. Every year 900 students graduate from the city's medical schools, more than the total number of additional doctors needed for the nine low-income communities CSS surveyed. Almost none set up office practices in these communities.

Government betrays the poor

Federal- and state-government efforts to address the primary care shortage since the mid-1970s have yielded few results. Mayor David Dinkins's recently announced CommuniCare plan to place family doctors in low-income communities will serve only 60,000 of the city's nearly 2 million needy people. Even this commendable effort will be difficult to staff given the shortage of primary care practitioners.

My next article will deal with financing health care so every American is adequately covered.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, August 21, 1993

Where have all the doctors gone?

When I was growing up in Brooklyn during the 1960s, there were doctors' offices all over Crown Heights. Today, a youngster in my old neighborhood with a commonplace illness – sore throat, earache, fever – would probably wind up in a hospital emergency room because he has no family physician.

Where have all the doctors gone? A 1990 survey by the Community Service Society of New York found that in nine poor communities, like Crown Heights, Harlem and the South Bronx, there were only 28 practicing private doctors serving 1.7 million people – less than one per 60,000 residents, and nowhere near the national average of one per 2,100.

Health care deficit

New York City has a health care deficit. The current system can provide 20.1 million primary care visits, but that leaves a shortfall of nearly three million visits. To fill the gap, some 1,300 additional full-time physicians or trained medical personnel such as nurse clinicians, physician assistants and midwives are necessary.

The CSS report recommended that a citywide organization be formed to bring primary care doctors back into underserved areas. That's about to happen.

With $17 million in planning and development money from the city and $250 million in tax-exempt bonds available through the state, the nonprofit Primary Care Development Corporation starts operations this summer. The first step is to identify those interested in developing primary care in underserved communities. PCDC will work with hospitals, neighborhood health centers and community-based organizations to expand or build new primary care facilities.

Within five years, some 30 of these centers will be up and running in all parts of the city. For the first time in a long time, doctors will be available in low-income areas to treat a range of childhood diseases, provide prenatal and pediatric care and manage such adult diseases as diabetes, high blood pressure and even AIDS.

The main objective of the centers will be to offer stable, consistent medical care. Individuals would always see the same practitioner or team. All centers will have evening and/or weekend hours to accommodate a working population. Even in off hours, a patient will be able to call in and speak to a doctor – a luxury middle-income families already enjoy. This service alone will eliminate much anxiety and unnecessary trips to hospital emergency rooms. Another boon will be scheduled appointments to cut down on waiting time.

Although no sites have yet been chosen, there are some innovative ideas. One suggestion is to place a medical center next to a 24-hour supermarket to give patients a sense of safety and security.

Better fees for doctors

Some issues remain to be worked out, but the biggest hurdle – allowing doctors to earn a living in poor communities – has been cleared. Doctors, both minority and non-minority disappeared from poor neighborhoods because they could not earn a living serving low-income patients. Medicaid reimbursement is only $13 a visit. Burdened by the need to repay the high cost of a medical education and to support a family, most doctors, some reluctantly, moved their practices to communities with privately insured patients.

The PCDC is now working with the state to assure that its centers are eligible for special primary care reimbursement programs. Fees can range from $70 to $130 a visit.

New centers will also be able to tap into the state's fund for uninsured patients. Another plus for doctors is that the centers' ties to hospitals will allow them to continue their professional advancement.

With a living wage for doctors ensured, the PCDC expects more new physicians, including minorities, will return to poor communities to practice family medicine.

A medical center next door to a 24-hour supermarket for safety and security

Hillary Rodham Clinton's health commission and the medical schools are currently looking at ways to make this type of practice as appealing as are higher-paid medical specialties. There is growing pressure to have schools redesign doctor training programs to provide hands-on experience in family medicine, particularly in inner-city sites.

Not only will PCDC's new network of primary care centers provide a better level of medical service in poor communities, but it will cost less than the current inefficient method. The city's annual bill for heath care is $30 million. An estimated $545 million a year can be saved by the family practice centers. The savings will come from reduced preventable admissions, fewer emergency room visits and less subspecialty clinic use.

At a time when taxes keep going up and municipal services are disappearing, PCDC's new prescription for providing medical care may be the best medicine of all.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, October 8, 1994

Don't Cut Harlem Hospital

Harlem Hospital is always treated like New York's stepchild. Not the only city health facility under the budget-cutting gun, it will take the biggest hit. The administration wants to reduce the facility's budget by $21 million. Unless plans change, Harlem will lose 119 beds and more than 300 employees ranging from doctors and nurses to clerks and dietary aides – crippling its capacity to offer decent health care.

Elsewhere, the mayor is demanding that the Health and Hospitals Corporation, which runs the city hospitals, eliminate 300 beds and more than 3000 employees from its 25,000-member work force. Seven of the city's 10 other hospitals face staff cuts too, as the city funding subsidy drops by $50 million in an attempt to close a $356-million hole in the overall $3.3 billion city hospitals budget. John Ronches of the Committee of Interns and Residents said it best: "These cuts are going to kill people."

Harlem has always been on the short end of health care delivery. After visiting riot-torn Harlem in 1935, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia promised the community a new hospital. It opened – in 1969. The only hospital in Manhattan to consistently serve generations of poor African Americans was "obsolete when they built it," says the HHC's North Manhattan vice president Bruce Goldman.

Union leader Jim Butler credits chronic supply shortages and understaffing with driving residents to the same voluntaries that routinely turned away Medicaid patients not so long ago. Harlem's long-promised ambulatory-care center, nowhere near start up, is just one on a list of broken promises. Starved for years, it's as if Harlem, Kings County, Woodhull and certain other city hospitals were set up to fail.

Obeying Two Masters

The present crisis underscores a long-standing HHC problem: the corporation is caught between two major players – the mayor and the affiliated private hospitals – who really call the shots.

Mayor Giuliani, who should be public health's chief defender, keeps HHC on a short fiscal leash while ridiculing it publicly. Instead of modernizing facilities, his administration strips assets so public hospitals cannot reconfigure resources and clean up their acts. Hospital heads are often figureheads, powerless to decide how best to serve their communities. Predictably, the HHC administration is in trouble, with resignations bringing to four those hospitals without permanent directors.

Because the affiliated teaching hospitals, which supply the bulk of the doctors, are the ones who really run the professional staffs, they make the only medical decisions that count at city hospitals. The affiliates' interest in specialized, often exotic medical research, is frequently at odds with the everyday health needs of the community.

And when city hospitals falter, the affiliates benefit by creaming insured patients – witness Harlem Hospital-affiliate Columbia Presbyterian and its new interest in serving Medicaid recipients in northern Harlem. A conflict of interest? It's the fox guarding the chicken coop.

Redeploy resources to where they are needed most

Despite its critics, Harlem Hospital offers life-saving medical care to low-income New Yorkers. United Hospital Fund statistics show the center providing vital emergency room, AIDS-treatment, maternity, substance abuse and ambulatory care services to residents in Central and East Harlem, Morningside Heights, Washington Heights and Inwood – services that could not be similarly offered by the private hospitals.

Ignoring long-range costs

By looking for solutions to short-term budget shortfalls at the expense of long-term health-care needs, the mayor's people are blundering disastrously. Starving health care today only causes greater cost and agony later, threatening everyone's health and quality of life. India's failure to have controls in place for an outbreak of plague could be New York's problem tomorrow with a different disease like tuberculosis.

Instead of wielding a meat cleaver, the city should be cutting with a surgeon's knife. That would lead to preserving and improving local community services that residents know, use and appreciate. It would also mean streamlining operations and redeploying resources to where they are needed most. If Harlem Hospital truly has too many empty beds for too few acute-care patients, then retrain and target personnel for primary care delivery instead. Don't furlough health care professionals, flatten the facility and mess with neighborhood people's already desperate lives.

The late Mayor La Guardia once said, "When I make a mistake, it's a beaut." Mayor Giuliani should take a lesson from history. It shouldn't take another riot and another 34-year interregnum to get decent health care up in Harlem.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, September 25, 1993

Privatizing Hospitals Could Hurt Poor

"Privatization" is the new health-care buzz word. People who should know better are jostling to embrace it without first asking who benefits and who loses. Selling off city hospitals, the lifeline for tens of thousands of New Yorkers, is deemed the only way to save money and improve health-service delivery.

Instead of a magic bullet, privatizing city hospitals will be a poison pill unless we first guarantee that every New Yorker has access to the same quality medical care. Otherwise, changes in hospital ownership are fake reforms. The present health-care infrastructure will be ransacked and insured and medicaid patients gobbled up for the benefit of financially strapped private hospitals – the real aim of some supporters of privatization.

Rather than rushing to dismantle the sole hospital system poor communities have, why not first figure out how New York City's Health and Hospitals Corporation and its 11 acute-care facilities can best be improved to meet the public's health needs?

Public hospitals' foes

HHC's critics are a mixed bunch. Some are out-and-out anti-government ideologues who think anything the public sector does should be done by private hands. Others are Wall Street municipal-bond underwriters fearful that city expenses might put their clients' investments at risk. Still others are medical "experts" whose professional experience comes overwhelmingly from the private sector and whose views are weighted toward the institutional demands of affiliates (the private teaching hospitals paired with city facilities). Lastly are the private, or voluntary hospitals, which are desperate for paying customers.

And then there are the politicians.

One prominent office seeker supports turning the city's hospitals into "voluntary, private nonprofit facilities like Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital," a move the candidate believes would cut administrative costs by "eliminating paperwork" at HHC headquarters. Like other critics, he cites rising HHC costs, overstaffing, and "cutting red tape" as reasons to unload city holdings.

HHC spokespersons respond that corporation costs are below those of private hospitals, that city facilities have higher occupancy rates, serve more outpatients and receive more emergency room visits.

The corporation says staff increases have been small when compared to private-hospital hiring, and that central office personnel took the brunt of recent layoffs. HHC is chronically underfunded, its problems stemming from fiscal shortfalls, not inefficiencies.

Voluntaries didn't serve the poor

What the privatizers want to forget is that the Health and Hospitals Corporation was created because voluntaries did not serve minority and low-income New Yorkers.

They should remember that private hospitals are businesses. Free to structure programs that maximize income while restricting services that are unprofitable or do not meet educational or research priorities, private institutions can – and do – ignore the needs of certain populations. So the city hospitals must provide the services that are low priority for the private sector.

Selling off city hospitals potential poison pill

Traditionally located in low-income areas, public hospitals treat not only those eligible for Medicaid, but the working poor who have inadequate or no private health insurance and cannot afford care. Among these are undocumented immigrants, another population the private hospitals historically ignored.

When cost-cutting government regulations limit patient hospital stays, they also force down hospital profits. Starved for paying patients, voluntaries routinely refuse service to the uninsured, despite programs like the state's bad debt and charity pool, meant to cover much of the health costs of indigent New Yorkers. Unreimbursed patients are regularly "dumped" on municipal hospitals, the same hospitals critics now want to privatize.

What to do

The last three years of budget cutting robbed city hospitals of $200 million, causing massive appointment delays, staff shortages and deteriorating conditions. Better funding and improvements in community-based primary care delivery and management could significantly improve the system.

The existing system is far from perfect. HHC must change its relationship with affiliates. The teaching-hospital medical staffs cost the corporation a full sixth of its entire $3 billion budget in affiliate fees per year, but are not responsible to HHC. And the affiliates' fixation with specialization over primary care compromises HHC's ability to provide real community service. The new affiliate agreement negotiated last July calls for joint planning. If adhered to, it can help the hospitals better address city needs.

This country works best with a mix of cooperating public, private and nonprofit institutions. Each form of organization should be judged on how well it operates, whom it serves and by what problems it faces. Thus the burden of proof is on the privatizers to demonstrate how their new system would mandate the same quality of care to the uninsured as is given to private patients.

Without this guarantee, privatization can only lead to remaking a few city hospitals, the potentially profit-making ones. After the voluntaries finish creaming reimbursable patients, the public facilities that remain will be like the wretched St. James Infirmary, where the poor go to die.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, February 5, 1994

CUNY Medical School Saves Lives

Walk into any emergency room in any city-run hospital in the five boroughs and you see the same painful scene played out. Poor New Yorkers crowd in, waiting to be treated for now-serious illnesses that could have been dealt with easier and earlier – if only patients had access to a general practitioner. From bronchitis and asthma to diabetes shock and seizure, the trauma units of inner-city hospitals are where too many poor people get to see a doctor first.

The Community Service Society reported in 1990 that only 28 qualified doctors serve the routine health needs of more than 1.7 million in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Low medicaid reimbursement rates, the higher pay, prestige and promotions that come from funding for specialized research and practices, and medical schools that pay scant attention to general medicine are some of the reasons why 70 percent of all medical graduates choose specialized careers. Meanwhile, the poor suffer.

But one medical school is bucking the trend. The City University of New York Medical School and its Sophie Davis School of Biomedical Education trains physicians to serve low-income people. Housed at the City College campus in Harlem, it deserves support.

Training and retaining

From his dean's office on the 9th floor of the Marshak Science Building high above Convent Avenue, with a panoramic view of central Harlem and its myriad problems and possibilities, Dr. Stanford Roman Jr. knows about the health care problems plaguing low-income New Yorkers. Since 1990, the tall, soft-spoken Dartmouth College and Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons' graduate and native New Yorker has presided over an education program that is changing how medicine is taught.

By training young doctors to serve in low-income communities, and by ensuring that each incoming class has a large proportion of people of color, Roman is creating a corps of primary care doctors to serve poor people while expanding access to medical careers for underrepresented minorities.

"Most medical schools screen students, and those without a strong science background tend to drop out. So minorities historically do drop out," Roman said. "Our program identifies students at the high school level. The focus is not to screen but to train." CUNY stresses a strong counseling component "so we don't lose these children. They are bright but have never been tested. We want them to succeed."

The program's low 14-percent attrition rate for its 325 students speaks to its commitment to training and retaining.

Compare CUNY's retention efforts with the national drop-out rate of 50 percent for all medical students. Among inner-city youngsters, the drop-out figure climbs to 80 percent. Not at CUNY.

"Except for historically black schools and those in Puerto Rico, we have the highest rate of minority graduates," Roman said.

Yet this program is not geared to any one ethnic or racial group. The composition of this year's class of 69 freshmen – 29 percent Black, 28 percent Asian, 20 percent White, and 16 percent Latino – shows a diverse student body representative of the city's people.

The CUNY system itself serves to spur graduates toward public service. A relatively inexpensive program, its graduates are not saddled with the huge debt that often forces young doctors into lucrative specialties simply to pay off their college loan obligations. Roman estimates that more than a third of the CUNY graduates continue, even after finishing their two-year requirement to work in medically underserved areas, to do primary care work in these areas. More than half of its 1000 graduates practice in the city.

Some schools screen students out. This one fights to keep them in.

Despite successful alumni, Roman faces a new fight. Now the program needs to grow beyond the present five-year combined B.S./Medical degree, where a student's final year of medical school is through a cooperative program with seven other institutions, including NYU School of Medicine and SUNY Health Center at Brooklyn. The program must become a full four-year medical school that grants its own M.D. and directly supervises students at hospital, clinical and ambulatory facilities.

Needs state support

The Sophie Davis School is forming a university hospital consortium with Maimonides Medical Center and three other medical facilities that will allow the university to directly confer its own M.D. degree. The program, which must be accredited by the licensing committee of the American Medical Association as well as by Association of Medical Colleges, needs political and financial support from the state if it is to expand.

A school that produces one percent of all state medical graduates, but 11 percent of all Black and Latino graduating doctors in-state, deserves that support. Likewise, politicians debating how best to guarantee universal health care can learn a lot about improving the quality of medical education and broadening the composition of medical care givers from the example of CUNY's Sophie Davis School.

Part Six

SOLVING THE HOUSING CRISIS

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, May 30, 1992

Protecting Low-Income Housing

The hulks of abandoned buildings lining many city streets and the homeless New Yorkers living from day-to-day in overcrowded shelters are grim reminders that society is not providing decent housing for its people. Yet with foresight, planning and the direct involvement of neighborhood groups, every New Yorker can have a decent, affordable place to live again.

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through most of the 1970s, a wave of disinvestment and landlord abandonment caused the loss of as many as 36,000 housing units a year. With New York City's economy still in recession, our neighborhoods again risk landlords abandoning buildings to decay.

The 1980s real estate boom and gentrification pressures pushed low-income tenants from their homes and neighborhoods, leading to the doubling up of hundreds of thousands of families and a surge in family homelessness. Vacant buildings on the Lower East Side and other neighborhoods were sold in the '80s at high prices regardless of their condition, and owners emptied buildings through deliberate neglect. Today, landlord abandonment threatens the remaining stock of affordable decent housing. Whether in periods of boom or bust, the poor suffer.

Landlords walk away

Despite its dominant role in housing, the private sector now lacks the capacity or the incentive to provide minimally decent housing to modest-income families.

Because property values drop in a recession, owners' chances for selling property at a profit fade. While rent increases slow, tenants have a harder time keeping up rent payments, and owners have fewer incentives to hold on to or maintain their property. Rising operating costs, particularly escalating water and sewer fees, now compound problems for those landlords still committed to providing decent services. To earn a profit, landlords reduce operating costs to a minimum. They cut back on heat, repairs and other essential services. Neglected buildings are "milked" as landlords collect rents while failing to pay property taxes or meet mortgage payments. While properties go through the process of being turned over to the lender or to the city, tenants risk displacement when apartments are no longer habitable. The city loses scarce affordable rental housing while paying the cost of taking over the building for back taxes.

More disinvestment expected

A new wave of owner disinvestment, largely the result of owner speculation and the overleveraging of mortgage debt during the 1980s boom, is hitting New York. According to New York City's Department of Finance, more properties are tax delinquent and in deeper debt. Mortgage arrears and foreclosures are increasing even in buildings with a broad mix of tenant incomes.

Affordable rental housing disappearing

In one mortgage-distressed Bronx building, tenants describe conditions as "unlivable" since the owner, who bought in the 1980s, stopped making payments on an over-appraised mortgage. Maintenance and repairs were put off while the building changed ownership from the landlord to the bank. By the time the state court appointed a receiver, the elevator was broken, and roof and plumbing problems caused severe water damage. Tenant and community pressure succeeded in getting the bank to make repairs and negotiate a sale to a responsible owner. Without such concerted neighborhood action, over 50 families might have lost their homes.

New policies needed

There are two major policies that city, state and federal governments must pursue to mitigate the harsh impact of the housing market seesaw on lower-income communities. The first is to expand programs that transfer housing from the for-profit sector to more responsible, alternative ownership by residents, community-based and nonprofit organizations, and public agencies like the Housing Authority.

There also needs to be stronger, ongoing public support for the many community-based organizations that work with tenants in at-risk rental housing. These groups provide the critical technical and organizing assistance – from architectural, accounting, legal and other skills – needed to carry out a successful transfer of ownership. It is maddening that local groups in hard-hit areas like Central Harlem face budget cutbacks precisely when the need for them is greatest.

The current recession in the housing market offers an opportunity for tenants and community organizations to take over at-risk housing and promote responsible alternative ownership. Such ownership requires a real – and not rhetorical – commitment by public officials to preserving this city's affordable housing stock.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, June 6, 1992

The Roots of Homelessness

On bustling Seventh Avenue, not far from Madison Square Garden where the Democratic National Convention meets next month, a gray-haired woman retrieves a chicken bone from a trash can. Dressed in an overcoat too warm for the day, she puts down several tattered bags before gnawing on the bone. Tossing it aside, she reaches in to drink from a discarded soda can. As Bob Marley put it, "In the abundance of water the poor are thirsty."

New Yorkers have become inured to such scenes, suffering from what commentators call "compassion fatigue." But we dare not be fatigued by the steady growth of homelessness in New York and in other cities across the nation.

The streets and shelters are home to 90,000 New Yorkers. Hundreds of thousands more are doubled-up in apartments of family and friends. The New York City Housing Authority estimates 39,000 households live doubled-up in its buildings alone.

What went wrong? Why can't this city – indeed, this country – end homelessness or address the critical housing needs of thousands of families and individuals?

Escalating housing costs

A growing number of people simply cannot afford housing. Eleven percent of families across the country pay more than 50 percent of their income for rent. Among households with incomes below $15,000 annually, 44 percent spend at least half their earnings on rent. With the loss of hundreds of thousands of blue-collar and service jobs employing African Americans and Latinos in cities like New York, even more families will be unable to afford housing.

Under Reagan-Bush, housing programs for poor shrank 81 percent

While people's inability to pay for housing is partly an outcome of the decline in job opportunities, it is also due to spiraling housing costs. In New York and other urban centers, real estate speculation and short-sighted municipal policies that promote the interests of for-profit private developers at the expense of low-income housing have escalated housing costs for all urban Americans. As the supply of affordable housing erodes, the poorest are forced onto the streets.

As the need for affordable housing grew over the last decade and homeless individuals and families flooded urban streets and shelters, federal housing assistance for the poor actually decreased. During the Reagan-Bush years, the amount spent on housing programs for the poor shrunk 81 percent, to $11.7 billion. Yet the federal government actually expends $113 billion in housing programs, much of it going to the economically well-off in the form of mortgage write-offs and property tax deductions. Households with incomes in the nation's top fifth receive nearly 60 percent of federal housing benefits.

There is enough blame for both parties to share. Democrats controlled the House of Representatives throughout the 1980s and all of Congress since 1986. Despite these majorities, they did not fight for an agenda that addresses the nation's most urgent housing needs.

People become homeless for clear and correctable reasons that government is largely in a position to change. A recent report by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of the U.S. Congress, found that the majority of individuals in shelters became homeless because of unemployment, low wages, loss of government benefits or domestic violence.

In other words, the homeless crisis is an expression of much larger imbalances in our society. Yet current efforts to address homelessness in New York City and elsewhere focus on offering temporary shelter and social services instead of attacking the real causes of homelessness. This means federal, state and local initiatives that provide permanent affordable housing and expanded economic opportunities.

Homeless a sitting target

Instead of offering leadership, too many policymakers blame the poor for their poverty, and among the poor no group is more visible than the homeless. None so assaults the sensibilities of society as the destitute who wander the streets or sleep in the subways and other public places. Convenient targets, the homeless receive the greatest amount of scapegoating from the media and public officials. Demonizing what is termed the "pathological" behavior of some, routinely painting the homeless as shiftless and drug-addled, calling for sweeping the destitute from the streets and sheltering them on islands away from the general populace – these methods ignore the joblessness, increasing poverty rates, landlord speculation, failed housing policies and political shortsightedness that contributed to the housing crisis.

A better idea is developing programs that offer safe, decent homes to all New Yorkers, That can be a foundation from which other problems are addressed. If we cannot ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing then we will continue to watch elderly women picking through the garbage of our cities for years to come, making a travesty of our claim to being the world's most productive and compassionate nation.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, March 20, 1993

Community Efforts Save Low-Income Housing

There are two stories about housing in urban America. One is grim, and one is hopeful. The first is about the loss of affordable homes, about families in the streets, and about landlords abandoning their property and their tenants. And there's the second story about how local people are fighting back, taking over and managing low-incoming housing in threatened communities.

Both stories are true.

Which one prevails depends on us.

Community-based organizations in major cities across the nation now play a vital role in managing and preserving affordable low-income housing. In New York City alone, 45,000 apartments are managed by nonprofit community organizations and by resident groups. These grass-roots efforts save a valuable resource. They have rebuilt communities threatened by housing disinvestment and abandonment by the private sector and by local governments straining to provide basic services for a growing number of poor residents. With all the problems they face and still must overcome, these groups teach lessons that can prevent a worsening neighborhood crisis.

Provide Valuable Lessons

We Are the Landlords Now is a new study by the Community Service Society of New York that examines the management track records of 27 community-run buildings with more than 700 units in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx. The experiences of groups like the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Tenants Association and the St. Nicholas Neighborhood Preservation Corporation are relevant to other cities as well.

The report finds no magical formula for good housing management, but isolates factors that make a difference: how involved tenants are in making decisions about running the building; how badly the building and its surroundings had deteriorated prior to the new ownership; the operating costs of the individual building; and the experience and approach of the community-based organizations and resident groups.

Community groups making revolution in low-income housing management

One issue that often stymies successful operations is the paradox of local insurgents who began by organizing and assisting tenants and now operate nonprofit housing as owner-managers. Many of these groups helped residents direct their anger at the absentee landlords responsible for deteriorating housing conditions. Now these same reformers – "the landlords now" – must manage, collect rents and respond to tenants when something goes wrong with their buildings. Local groups must learn to resolve the potentially conflicting roles of housing manager and community empowerment advocate.

Many community-based housing management organizations are overextended. They struggle with limited resources to do the day-to-day management, maintain good tenant relations and often provide unfunded services to tenant victims of the city's economic decline who are unable to keep up rent payments.

The most successful community groups incorporate tenants into the decision-making process, linking building issues to broader community concerns like housing preservation and community stability. The report finds that tenant involvement and participation are central to effective community and resident management.

Housing in hard times

New York and many other cities face fiscal constraints and stagnant local economies. Increased operating costs of running low-income housing and limited public funds for ongoing support of housing intensify the challenge to community-based organizations and resident groups.

New York City's current plans to accelerate the disposition of occupied city-owned buildings to nonprofit organizations under the NOW program (or Neighborhood Ownership Works) validates the role these groups play. But in recognizing the local groups' work, the city must not just shift the burden of low-income housing to nonprofit organizations unless it also provides long-term supports needed to maintain affordable housing.

One such support, the study argues, would be to establish a citywide umbrella organization that would provide technical training in management as well as bulk-buying power for locally run buildings.

Pay now or pay later

Supporting the work of these organizations is a preventive measure, and *We Are The Landlords Now* makes clear why. For practical and political reasons, those public officials and policy makers who want to empower low-income communities should see that these experiments succeed. Without these groups, tenants risk ending up homeless, and the public sector would be forced to shelter them or build permanent housing to replace the squandered private-sector stock.

And backing these groups does not imply support for privatization or offer an excuse for public officials to wash their hands of their housing resposibilities. Government at every level must continue to improve their public housing programs while standing behind the housing efforts of nonprofits. Continued and even stepped-up government funding that assures nonprofits are able to manage effectively and continue to link tenants to the kinds of social services they may at times need is vital.

[Copies of *We Are The Landlords Now* are available @ $9 from the CSS Office of Information, 105 E. 22 Street, New York, NY 10010.]

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, May 22, 1993

More Homelessness on the Way

Today's crisis of disappearing affordable housing will lead to increased homelessness and devastated communities unless we take immediate steps to save buildings at risk.

A recent Community Service Society report, *Housing on the Block: Disinvestment and Abandonment Risks in New York City Neighborhoods*, looks at the state of privately owned rental housing. Its conclusions are frightening. The report finds that an estimated 7,500 buildings with 140,000 apartments – an astounding one in every six rental properties – are at risk of being lost because of city takeovers for unpaid taxes or bank foreclosures.

Rising operating costs, mortgage debt, growing tenant poverty and the slumping regional economy are factors that force some landlords to withdraw resources that usually keep their buildings going. They cut back on important services and repairs, default on mortgage payments and fail to pay property taxes. The next step is abandonment, when an owner stops collecting rents or leasing vacant units, fails to make outlays of any kind and lets the mortgage lender or the city take over the building.

The phenomenon is not new. In the late 1960s and 1970s, many cities experienced major waves of abandonment. During the worst of these years, New York City lost more than 38,000 apartment units annually. While some blamed rent control, cities without controls also lost affordable housing because of abandonment. About half of the buildings taken over by New York City were occupied, with tenants living in deteriorated buildings that had been neglected for years. Nearly all of the abandoned housing was concentrated in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

We now face a similar crisis. Of the 7,500 buildings at risk, half are seriously behind on taxes and eligible for takeover and management by the city. The remainder are undergoing foreclosure as mortgage lenders take over rental buildings whose owners have stopped making payments. Why are mortgage foreclosures a problem? Because in the two to three years it takes to complete foreclosure actions in the courts, a building neglected by the defaulting owner and the lender can become uninhabitable. In only one out of 10 cases does the court appoint a receiver to collect rents and provide interim management of the building during foreclosure actions.

Minorities hit hardest

Housing abandonment risks hit minority communities hardest. Risks are concentrated in about a third of the city's community districts, those with high populations of poor African American and Latino households, which were also hardest hit by the abandonment of the previous decades. And in Central Harlem and East Harlem in Manhattan, Bedford-Stuyvesant and Bushwick in Brooklyn, and Mott Haven and Hunts Point in the Bronx, abandonment risks are far greater than the city average, running as high as 25 to 50 percent of the community's rental stock.

These are also the neighborhoods where mortgage foreclosures are frequent but occur without benefit of receivership. In upscale areas, foreclosed buildings are more likely to be put into a receiver's hands until a property resale can be worked out.

City solutions hampered

Abandonment and homelessness must be dealt with at the source: by stepping up and targeting housing-code enforcement and community-based tenant assistance to high-risk neighborhoods; by providing assistance to conscientious owners or receivers who will make improvements; and by promoting ownership transfers to residents and community nonprofit organizations. If these things are not done, affected communities will face devastation. Tenants will be forced to move, often into doubled-up situations with friends or relatives, or become homeless. The city will then carry the fiscal and management burdens of more occupied city-owned buildings, rising family homelessness, and the enormous cost of repairing or replacing lost housing.

One in every six rental units could be lost

The city should act now, says the report, but it cannot. Because of the lingering recession, the city and the state can neither maintain current budgets for critical anti-abandonment programs nor increase funding and efforts to help vulnerable neighborhoods. In the last three years alone, the city cut anti-abandonment programs by close to 30 percent.

Increasing federal assistance now would allow the city to accelerate community preservation and development activities. Tragically, Congress rejected the president's economic stimulus package, which would have given the city an immediate $140 million in additional community development block grant funds. New York must be prepared – despite enormous fiscal strains and the temptation to use federal grants to fill budget gaps – to see that federal dollars get to the streets and buildings and residents of the communities where they are most desperately needed.

(Copies of *Housing on the Block* are available for $12 from CSS, Department of Information, 105 East 22 Street, NYC 10010.)

Part Seven

IMPROVING RACE RELATIONS AND EMPOWERMENT

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, October 23, 1993

Supreme Court Threatens Voting Rights

The political savaging of civil rights veteran Lani Guinier was no isolated incident. Across the nation, policies empowering people of color are threatened. Even the Supreme Court, among the strongest defenders of equal justice only a generation ago, now backs those who say race-conscious remedies are no longer needed. The High Court is dangerously wrong.

In *Shaw v. Reno*, the Court ruled 5-4 that redistricting legislation may be unconstitutional if it produces districts justified solely on racial grounds, i.e., on the need for minority districts. The decision is prompting calls to redraw New York City's new councilmanic lines.

The challenge in *Shaw* was to a newly carved North Carolina congressional district that sent an African American to Congress from the state for the first time since Reconstruction. The oddly shaped district, designed under Voting Rights Act and federal Justice Department pressure to end White political dominance, linked two African American communities in Charlotte and Durham – separate areas with similar populations, problems and lack of representation.

Even with the new districts, the state's white monopoly remained. While more than one in five North Carolinians are Black, African Americans hold just two of its 12 congressional districts. Yet one of the two new districts was challenged by five White voters, saying it violated their constitutional right to participate in a "color blind" electoral process. The Supreme Court agreed with the challengers.

The court's ruling is perfidious. Worse, more may come. At least two other voting rights cases will be considered by the Court this year. The votes on these, says American University law professor Herman Schwartz in *The Nation* (Oct. 25), "may indicate whether the Court does indeed intend to cripple the [Voting Rights] act."

Why racial districting?

Gerrymandering is an imperfect, but necessary, tool. But remember where racial districting came from. The generally accepted principle of "one person, one vote," began with attempts to end discrimination against African Americans in the South. As Black areas of Southern states outgrew White areas, legislative districts stayed the same, diluting the voting strength of the more populous, African American sections. This devious practice was finally outlawed by a wiser Supreme Court in 1964.

Numerous attempts were made since to divide and minimize the growing voting strength of people of color.

The passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act was another step toward correcting mistreatment of Black voters. Section 5, the Act's strongest provision, affects areas with patterns of voting rights abuses against racial and language minorities. These abuses happened not just in the South.

In New York, Blacks could not vote until 1874, after the Fifteenth Amendment forced amending of the state Constitution. New York's literacy test for voting, overturned in 1965, was designed to bar illiterate Blacks from voting, said the Supreme Court. Administered in English, the literacy test also discriminated against Puerto Rican voters. Along with historic patterns of low participation and underrepresentation of minorities in elected office, the test resulted in Bronx, Kings and New York counties being covered by Section Five and the city's voting procedures scrutinized by the Justice Department.

Support for minority districts

Advocates of voting rights support minority districts, even bizarrely shaped, gerrymandered ones incorporating scattered communities – because such districts are now the only way to solidify strong minority representation in government. And the reason these districts are the only vehicle for achieving political parity is because Whites in large numbers will not vote for minority candidates. Race is still the best predictor of minority candidates' success.

Racial wrongs still require racial remedies

White racial bloc voting pervades virtually all poll-booth activity. When former Congressmember (and now agriculture secretary) Mike Espy of Mississippi first went to Washington, he was elected with only 12 percent of the White vote. Closer to home, David Dinkins was rejected by 73 percent of White voters in the 1989 mayoral race. Even a centrist like Virginia's Douglas Wilder captured only 41 percent of White support in his successful run for the governor's office.

Yet minority districts, as valuable as they are, are only short-run. self-limiting, solutions. Successful politics demands that our representatives be attuned to the needs of all racial and ethnic groups. African American and Latino representatives who enjoy the benefit of representing multiracial districts can be highly effective office holders.

Minority districts are only a first step in securing equality of representation. A second, parallel goal is quality representation. But until voters judge candidates solely by their record, values and qualifications, voting rights activists will have to continue pressuring the courts to support minority districts. As Lani Guinier knows – and paid the price for knowing – racial wrongs still require racial remedies

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, December 26, 1992

Bashing Immigrants Today - Who's Next?

Attacks on the foreign-born dominate the news abroad and at home. The obscenity of "ethnic cleansing," starvation, and concentration-camp madness in disintegrating Yugoslavia or the murder of a Turkish mother and her children, the firebombing of immigrant hostels and the mob attacks against foreign workers in Germany have the smell of something we thought long dead-and-buried.

Violence against those the European racists call "the Blacks" – Turks and North Africans living peacefully and productively in Europe for years – signals a return to the political atmosphere that bred the Nazi extermination of the so-called "lesser peoples" of an earlier generation.

The rationale for these attacks is sickeningly familiar. Given economic stagnation, immigrants are said to compete with native workers for scarce jobs and to overuse social services that strain strapped national economies. Europe's prolonged recession and the absence of principled political leadership could lead to a 1930s-like repression.

Why write about foreign problems in this column? Because in the fires of Europe we may be seeing our own future if we don't act now.

Attacks on Latinos

Immigrant bashing is rampant in the U.S. today, and takes many forms. It isn't only limited to the forced repatriation of destitute Haitian refugees or Border Patrol abuse and vigilante violence against undocumented aliens – attacks which are notorious throughout the Southwest. It starts from an environment where immigrants are wrongly blamed for a host of ills – from increasing crime rates, disappearing jobs, housing and social services to a loss of national identity and purpose – and ends with a general assault on all minorities and the poor.

One pernicious development is the "English-Only" movement and its campaign for an English-language amendment to the U.S. Constitution – summarized by one supporter as "one flag, one language," which finds fertile ground among people traumatized by the collapsing economy and cultural changes. A Roper poll of Californians, whose state has a sizable immigrant population, found an overwhelming majority believing the number of arriving immigrants was "too high", and that they were "a financial burden on the state," despite no evidence supporting this point.

Proponents of English-only claim that their amendment would unify the nation. Yet Blacks and Whites historically share a common language that has not substantially helped unite them.

Frustrated by the chronic unemployment plaguing poor neighborhoods, some African American community leaders have actually joined the bigots' choir, giving aid and comfort to those who would set the Haitian boat people adrift. Such scapegoating is mistaken and dangerous. Any claim to moral authority is lost when immigrants of color and Spanish speakers are attacked by those who should be their allies.

These attacks risk dividing the African American community, where large numbers of Blacks are recent immigrants. Of New York City's Black population, for example, one in every four is foreign born. These Afro-Caribbean, Guyanese and African newcomers are a vital part of the city, and we dare not fight among ourselves and play into the hands of the racists. As the city Human Rights Commission's Rolando T. Acosta recently told *The New York Times*, "It is not a coincidence that as the immigrant pool has darkened, hostility has grown." Telling the truth about why poverty persists – and not blaming other poor people – is the only strategy that will lead to lasting social change.

No Job Stealing

Immigrants do not displace poor native Blacks from available jobs. Likewise, freezing immigration will not ease job problems among the native unemployed or dent the crime rate. Joblessness is not a product of immigration but of historical discrimination, institutional racism, systematic deprivation, and the flight of capital away from job-producing industries and city centers. Blaming immigrants is demagogic nonsense.

Blaming immigrants divides movement for social change

Immigrants frequently take low-waged jobs in family settings that are not covered by medical insurance. Those hired as poorly paid off-the-book domestics work for people who would not, or could not, pay better wages. And unskilled factory jobs others do not want – in sweatshops, private apartments and poorly ventilated lofts – exist precisely because they are badly paid, backbreaking and exploitative.

Efforts to improve conditions or unionize this new work force often end in the jobs disappearing, and for good reason. If blame is warranted, it is against employers who create dangerous, low-paying jobs, and not desperate immigrants who take them.

Instead of discouraging immigration or retreating from bilingualism, why not extend to permanent residents the right to vote in municipal elections? Perhaps that can help spark the emergence of a political leadership sensitive to the needs of the inner city. And as Tacoma Park, Md. found after relaxing its voting laws, newly enfranchised immigrants make excellent neighbors.

This nation will only be strengthened by adopting a humane immigration policy and enshrining tolerance and cooperation as part of our national ethic. If the ravening in Europe is any example, we really have no choice.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, May 9, 1992

The Real Lesson of Rodney King

Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Kennedy, the Kerner Commission, and now the Rodney King verdict and burning Los Angeles warn us that this nation cannot survive divided into Black and White America – one poverty-stricken and dispairing, the other blind or indifferent to the havoc around it. Poverty and disrespect dog young people growing up in the nation's inner cities. They need fair treatment, good education and a chance at a decent paying job, or they will continue to explode in rage and frustration.

What are our elected officials doing about it? Nothing!

Simple facts escape the politicians busy cutting social programs: most low-income adults and their children are poor either because parents are out of work or because their jobs do not pay enough. New York and other cities no longer generate new jobs at decent wages so poor people can escape poverty. While the national and regional recession continues, jobs – and especially entry-level jobs for low-skilled, disadvantaged individuals – are disappearing. No jobs, no justice, no hope.

Huge job decline in 1991

Since 1989, the city lost 345,000 jobs, a decline of almost 10 percent, while last year's six-percent decline was greater than any yearly drop experienced even during the 1970s fiscal crisis. Despite press attention to Wall Street's job losses, most New York State losses were in industries employing low-income or blue-collar workers. The wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing and construction industries accounted for 86 percent of all jobs lost, with the bulk of the decline in the metropolitan area. Of the fourteen state counties with the most job losses, ten were in New York City or the surrounding suburbs.

Poor people, many with low skills and limited education, traditionally work as salespeople, factory workers, and laborers. When those jobs disappear, the means of avoiding poverty through honest labor disappears too.

Young Blacks hit hardest

People of color fare worse than others when jobs vanish. Unemployment rates for young Blacks soar as high as 50 percent in New York and other cities. Black unemployment has been double that of Whites in good times and bad, but African American workers, because of their concentration in blue collar occupations, were devastated by the collapse of the "rust belt" in the last decade. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, almost 60 percent of all employed Black men held blue-collar jobs by 1970. When America's steel and auto industries contracted in the 1980s, productive Black families were hurt badly.

Although there was some unskilled job growth in the 1980s, poor inner-city residents were often physically isolated from the new jobs developing in remote sections of the city and suburbs. And active hiring discrimination, most blatant against young Black men, continues to exacerbate the job crisis. Unscrupulous employers pit immigrants and others against each other to reduce wages on the few remaining jobs.

Unemployed today brutalized

Being unemployed today is more brutalizing than at any time in the last quarter century. Where once a laid-off worker could get medical care via another family member's coverage, today even fully employed workers have no guarantee of health coverage for themselves or their families. Americans not covered by health insurance have increased from 28 to 37 million since 1980. Fewer workers are protected by unemployment insurance, and those receiving meager benefits must pay taxes on them.

Full time + low pay = poor

Even those working full time have no guarantee of moving out of poverty. A low wage, full-time job won't do, when the current absurdly low minimum wage of $4.25 an hour, or $7,735 per year, is beneath the federal poverty line for a couple ($9,190) or a family of four ($13,360).

The job situation faced by the poor – a plummeting national and local economy, not enough jobs available, wages below subsistence level, racially discriminatory and divisive hiring practices – requires leadership now. As with access to quality education, we should struggle to guarantee decent, well-paying jobs as a human right.

If the private economy cannot generate jobs, then public policy must step in with jobs that can, for example, help rebuild our crumbling city infrastructures. We need comprehensive planning that takes into account factors such as transportation and zoning in creating employment and training programs. Above all, we need political leaders who understand that the nation will either pay now for programs that allow people to escape poverty or pay later in lost property, lives and world leadership.

Part Eight

SAFEGUARDING THE FUTURE

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, November 5, 1994

No Urban Agenda in This Albany Race

The politicians have done a good job putting voters to sleep through this year's governor's race. The campaign is trivial when the state's problems are substantial and personality-driven when our difficulties demand real debate and informed choices.

Not one gubernatorial candidate speaks for the cities, for the poor, for people of color or even for working people. Job creation is off the radar screen. So is ensuring that the state has the dollars to spend on essential public needs. Not only will there be no face-to-face debate, there is almost no discussion over what policies the state should adopt.

Taxes, the #1 issue on voters' minds (followed closely by crime and job loss, say every poll), leads to proposals on both sides for tax cuts that play well in the suburbs and attract some swing voters. But proposing cuts without explaining how these will affect social welfare spending is unconscionable. If racism or ignorance dupes some into believing they don't need municipal and state services, most know that only government can provide things like public education, mass transit, garbage pickup in residential areas, road construction and police protection. Today, even the incumbents run against government. That is pandering, not leadership.

Is it any wonder that the electorate is fed up, and voter registration is down?

Since November 1993, the rolls of registered voters fell two percent. City registrations collapsed since the high of the David Dinkins enrollment push in 1989. While groups like CSS's Voter Participation Project do yeoman work registering voters and holding forums on key local issues, registration this summer has been negligible. Yet it is essential that all of us go to the polls and make our voices heard on November 8th.

State/city share financial weakness

As unpopular as it might sound, the one thing the politicians must not do is cut taxes or services. Both the city and state cannot now raise the money they need. The revenues it does collect, from regressive sales taxes and user fees, disproportionately hurt those who can least afford them. Since 1986, unwise tax cuts to New York's wealthiest and massive breaks to corporate developers – without mechanisms holding them accountable for investing wisely in New York – are responsible for much of our fiscal shortfall.

These cuts, in New York and elsewhere, also explain some of the growth in income inequality over the last decade. The Census Bureau shows the top fifth of all families earning nearly 45 percent of all U.S. income, while the bottom fifth earns less than 4.5 percent. This is the largest gap since the Census first tracked the data in 1947.

But instead of confronting the revenue crisis squarely, both major party candidates promise yet another tax cut – one that will lead the state into fiscal chaos.

The Albany-based Fiscal Policy Institute estimates a $4.2 billion state-budget shortfall for 1996 – and that without additional cuts in revenue.

All of us must make our voices heard at polls November 8

Even good times will not affect that deficit. Says the Institute's Frank Mauro: "If the economy grew by 10 percent over the next two years (a very optimistic forecast), this would [still] leave the state with a $3.6 to $3.7 billion budget gap in 1996-97."

Will the gap be made up in slashed services, higher user fees and local property taxes, exactly what is happening in New Jersey only 10 months after its governor was elected on a slash-and-burn tax platform?

Mayor Giuliani says his endorsement of the governor was predicated on who would help the city most. With the mayor slashing jobs and essential services and facing an almost $3 billion hole in his next budget, he expects heavy financial backing from Albany. But where will it come from if tax cuts are enacted? We hope the governor, if reelected, stands with his core constituencies and insists that his new-found ally in City Hall does nothing more to dismantle an already damaged social support system.

Really one-party system

Not only are our finances askew, so is our two-party system. It resembles more what the late African American sociologist Oliver C. Cox called "two factions of the same party" than legitimate opponents. Yet we cannot abandon traditional allies to embrace long-standing enemies. We have to remind those we elect that they have an obligation to deliver the services we need.

The programs this column repeatedly calls for, including long-range planning for job creation, corporate accountability on investment tax breaks and tax increases for those who can most afford them, would help improve everyone's quality of life.

Wouldn't it be nice if these were the issues the campaign revolved around?

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, December 10, 1994

Signs of Hope Amid Election Wreckage

If last month's election of a conservative Congress signals perilous times ahead, it also points to an unprecedented opening for the coalition of African Americans, Latinos, progressives and women to make real strides in the future.

This is not to minimize the losses, which were devastating, or exaggerate how easily we can build a new movement with fresh leaders and solid ideas. Last month's racially divisive and personality-driven campaigns produced a political disaster, placing bitterly anti-urban majorities in both houses of Congress and saw conservatives in both parties win huge majorities in governors' mansions and state legislatures nationwide. Those chanting the mantra of small government, low taxes and gutted social services are in the cat-bird seat, menacing not just poor African Americans and Latinos, but minority members and women from every social class. Meanwhile those who know city, suburban and rural problems require coordinated solutions are further from power than ever.

Black leadership hobbled

African American politicians in Congress suffered a stunning knockout punch. Harlem Congressman Charles Rangel, next in line to head the powerful House Ways and Means committee, was reduced to a member of the minority Democratic "opposition," with little power to stop anti-urban legislation impoverishing the cities and devastating the poor. Appropriations sustaining the influential Congressional Black Caucus will be wiped out and its talented and productive watchdog staff fired. The caucus will lose 20 House chairmanships, important offices that helped create a more level playing field for America's working people.

But the rout can be reversed if we don't make fatal errors like abandoning electoral politics, which only plays into the hands of reactionaries in both parties. At home, we have to correct a leadership crisis in our own institutions, with the one-time powerhouse NAACP scandal-ridden and twisting in the wind and the National Urban League just beginning its slow climb back to national prominence under Hugh Price.

A front-page *Wall Street Journal* article (11/28/94) shows the way, demonstrating how liberal causes like the National Organization for Women and the Sierra Club, in the face of the new conservative challenge, are strengthening their fundraising while deepening and broadening their membership bases. Our own African American organizations also have to use the threat of a resurgent and intoleran right wing to rebuild themselves as an effective and credible moral and mobilizing voice.

We have our work cut out for us, because the resurgent right threatens not only poor Blacks but puts at risk every single Black American's hard-won gains. Our middle class is under assault on issues from affirmative action and weakened anti-discrimination laws to educational and job opportunities. But the crisis also offers the opportunity for the Columbia University professor and the Brownsville mother on public assistance, the downtown corporate lawyer and the bicycle messenger to pull together in a way not seen since the civil rights movement.

Leadership crisis in our own institutions... scandal-ridden and twisting in the wind

The latest Census shows more than 40 million Black Americans in the U.S. population, more than the combined population of the Scandinavian countries. Many are hit by unemployment, homelessness, and crime, and all are targets for the hard right's hate campaign. But we are not the only ones threatened.

Tasks ahead

In a wobbly economy, with tens of millions unemployed, our enemies look for scapegoats, and nobody is immune. Because the right has no tolerance for the young, women, immigrants, Jews, ethnics of any color, the handicapped, White progressives, members of religious groups not their own or even traditional White Christians who do not share their zealotry, no one is safe from what could explode into a war of "ethnic cleansing."

Because we need allies and others need us, building a coalition that takes back the country is in our hands. This isn't a Republican or a Democratic thing. Many Republicans will make their breaks with the extreme right, just as some Democrats will curry favor with them. Our job is to set an aggressive and visionary agenda for both parties.

That means telling the truth about the nation's condition and what to do about it. I applaud Congressman Rangel's demand for a greater Black and urban elected officials' voice in the Democratic Party's inner circles. The same should be demanded by his counterparts in the Republican party.

Repeating our mistakes will be deadly. Without taking back core community institutions, without aggressive election sign-up and voting campaigns, and without making principled overtures to potential allies, the right's ascendancy could be permanent – and our children will curse our lack of will.

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, July 2, 1994

A Bleak Future for Our Kids

I've made the point before, about how growing numbers of uneducated and unskilled Americans are a threat to themselves and the future of the whole society.

A recent Riker's Island survey shows that only 10 percent of its inmates have finished high school. *Newsday* columnist Sheryl McCarthy calls our state prisons "pools of ignorance," where "75 percent of the inmates have no high-school diploma."

Even basic writing skills are declining. The federal Department of Education found that more than half of all high school seniors could not write a persuasive essay on any topic, a basic requirement for a growing number of jobs.

Now a federal report warns we are moving toward a caste system based on employment, income, education and skills – one as rigid as that prevailing in India before the practice was outlawed.

Written by a federal commission chaired by former Secretary of Labor John Dunlop, the joint Labor and Commerce Department report found that wage distribution in America is the most unequal of any developed nation in the world. Wages actually fell for male workers, a development the report said was "unprecedented in the past 75 years in this country." The impact was primarily (though not exclusively) on those who are marginally skilled and poorly educated.

Two-tier workers

The report says "the stagnation of real earnings and increased inequality of earnings" is dividing Americans into "an upper tier of high-wage, skilled workers and an increasing 'underclass' of low-paid labor." It cites the development of "a large growing population for whom illegal activity is more attractive than legitimate work" and warns that "a healthy society cannot continue along the path the U.S. is moving."

The commission also recognized the role unions play in protecting workers' rights to organize and keep their jobs, a vital tool in stopping the slide of wages and averting poverty. Organized labor, which is beginning to understand that today's well-paid worker could be tomorrow's welfare recipient, applauded the report.

Georgia Representative and civil-rights hero John Lewis told the *Boston Globe* that the report's findings were "nothing short of a powerful mandate for new laws to protect worker rights and promote workplace cooperation in the place of workplace confrontation."

But the report, released June 2, may already be gathering dust on library shelves. That would be a pity. Because what it says about the links between jobs, union rights, skill levels and poverty could shape and inform public debate on everything from education for inner-city kids to health-care and welfare reform. The report's understanding of why jobs are disappearing underscores why it is wrong for Congress and the Clinton administration to insist on strict time limits for people on welfare without dealing with the fact that low-skilled former workers stand little chance of finding even marginal employment. What they need is less guilt tripping and more job training. What they really need is a job.

No recommendations

A rigorous federal study with hard recommendations could add much-needed context to the seemingly endless congressional monologues on health care and welfare "reform" and improving educational services for all Americans. Unfortunately the politically diverse commission, after a good stab at describing the problem, pulled its punches when it came to saying what to do.

Playing it safe resulted in a report strong on description, but weak in solutions. For example, it skirts any discussion of how to deal with the soaring loss of high-paid jobs that *Business Week* (May 9) estimates total more than 3,100 each business day, with the 25 largest announced staff cuts alone accounting for 621,000 jobs gone since 1991.

3,100 high-paid jobs lost each business day

As skilled and educated workers hunt for almost any kind of work, what will be left for the unskilled and poorly educated youngster? How secure is the minimally educated but law-abiding, hard-working breadwinner?

Opportunity denied

There's a plaque in Rockefeller Center honoring its multi-billionaire founder. It quotes John D. Rockefeller Jr. saying he opposed "guaranteeing" anyone a living, but he supported giving everyone the "opportunity" to earn a living.

Articulated by one of America's once-leading conservative voices, the principle that all Americans must have the chance to make a decent life for themselves through hard work is now under siege. If you don't have a good education and marketable skills, or were not born wealthy, and you don't win the lottery, your future is bleak. And if you are a minority as well...?

The URBAN AGENDA

by David R. Jones

Saturday, June 4, 1994

Time to Make Young People Our Priority

Charles Dickens, the 19th century's leading chronicler of poverty and working class life, called the period before the French revolution "the best of times" and "the worst of times." The same can be said about conditions facing young African Americans today.

• *The best of times:* We have reason to be optimistic. After years in which Black history was ignored, African American studies programs flourish on hundreds of campuses. Multicultural education is so pervasive that critics must characterize the new thinking as "politically correct." Jobs in all fields are opening to educated young Black people who will earn more in a few years than their parents did in a lifetime. Highly paid athletes, media stars and entertainers are role models for Black and White youth alike.

• *The worst of times:* We are witnessing the worst times since slavery. Schools maintain "grieving rooms" where students mourn slain classmates. Children of heroin- and crack-addicted mothers fight to survive. While NBA stars urge young people to "stay in school," only 30 percent of young Black male high-school graduates attend college (and just one of these three finishes higher education).

Many stand a better chance of earning a living selling drugs than holding a low-paying job. In Washington, D.C., 42 percent of Black males aged 18 to 35 are either incarcerated, on probation or parole, out on bail, or being sought on an arrest warrant. Baltimore's figure is a staggering 58 percent. Blacks are seven times more likely than Whites to be imprisoned.

Unprecedented numbers of young Black people, college educated and supported by stable families, do well. But a growing mass of young people's future is bleak.

In a recent *New Yorker* article, Harvard's Henry Louis Gates Jr. noted how "the social landscape" observers lamented 30 years ago "was a veritable church picnic compared with the bullet-pocked desolation of the inner city now." What hope is there for a Brooklyn, Detroit or Oakland child with a criminal record, no skills and no ability to write and compute?

Whites threatened too

While every social problem is felt first and deepest among African Americans, the decaying quality of life is at its core a national – not a peculiarly Black – issue.

The growing wage gap between the highly educated and the barely educated runs within as well as between racial groups. As *Education Week* (January 26, 1994) reports, "Half of all high school graduates have still not found a steady job by age 30....shifting from one low-paying job to another with little opportunity for training or career advancement." The U.S. Labor Department estimates that real wages for already low-paid noncollege-educated workers fell by 20 percent since 1983. Plummeting reading scores mean that White youngsters who are insufficiently motivated, trained or lucky enough to have wealthy parents will also find themselves without jobs, income or hope.

Worst times since slavery

Absent government initiatives, today's child will be the marginal adult of the next decade. This is a situation ripe for extremist exploitation, but it also offers ways to cooperate.

Solutions

What to do first?

• Forget welfare reform. Overhaul our tattered unemployment insurance and job-training systems instead. The worker of the future must be skilled and capable of doing numerous tasks well. That takes training. Here we can learn from both Germany and Japan, whose apprentice programs teach marketable skills, whose employers are committed to keeping and retraining workers, and where generous, longterm and comprehensive unemployment insurance programs keep the jobless from settling for jobs with no future.

• Don't worry about high wage-rates pushing jobs south of the border or overseas. As the *Economist* notes (April 2), "So long as American workers possess better skills and use better technology, they can compete despite enjoying higher wages."

• Kick the habit of knee-jerk support for one party. "Realism" means punishing all politicians who defund urban programs.

• Strengthen and stabilize our communities with better police presence and more available counseling programs while – as Surgeon General Elders suggested – decriminalizing narcotics. Decriminalization alone would separate crime from drug dependency and casual use, freeing up police to attack real crimes.

• Retain easy access to a good general higher education while finding better ways to connect schooling with the working world.

• Most of all, create high-skill, high-wage jobs, not simply balance government budgets to make the economy safe solely for the private sector. Real job creation, not welfare for the rich, must guide government action.

Dickens wrote: "Money and goods are certainly the best of references." If we do not help young people, bereft of money and hungering for goods, then America itself has no future.

About the author and the Community Service Society of New York

From his perspective as president and chief executive officer of one of the nation's largest and oldest social service institutions, the Community Service Society's David R. Jones is uniquely situated to comment on the problems that confront the urban poor. While there are no easy answers to these complex matters, the Community Service Society does in-depth research in inner-city neighborhoods as well as analysis of population trends and government funding policies to come up with reasoned proposals.

Jones is the voice of CSS. He shares his knowledge and experience in the community and the research done by his organization in his twice-monthly columns in the *New York Amsterdam News,* the city's leading African American newsweekly. Titled "The Urban Agenda," the columns explore practical options that can help resolve today's pressing social problems.

"The Urban Agenda" column also appears nationwide in newspapers serving communities of color. In the latest expansion of its audience, Jones hosts a monthly cablevision show with the same name that reaches 1.4 million viewers in New York City's five boroughs and a radio show that airs to an urban and suburban audience of 15 million.

At CSS, Jones directs a staff of 130 on projects ranging from senior volunteerism to affordable housing, equity in education, primary health care and income security issues. He also sits on the board of directors of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, whose 21 municipal facilities largely serve poor and immigrant populations. Recognized as an astute commentator on social problems, Jones is a sought-after guest for television and radio public affairs shows and has written articles for the *Fordham Urban Law Journal* and *Dissent* magazine.

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